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# I Sowed the Dragon's Teeth

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静夜思床前明月光	<i>Before my bed, the moon is shining bright</i>
疑是地上霜	<i>I think that it is frost upon the ground</i>
举头望明月	<i>I raise my head and look at the bright moon</i>
低头思故乡	<i>I lower my head and think of home</i>

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—Li Bai



Wales, 1998: Year of the Rabbit

Dusk settles in a descending gloom beneath the pines, veiling the forest paths up to the ancient dragon hills. They say those distant grey arcs are where the dragons once slept, megalithic spines ridging the horizon with treetops. A village sits in their shadow now. The local pub is named after them. And beside their summits, thick with the night coming down, I can believe there were once dragons sleeping, even stirring, beneath this land.

Breath rising, I pull the collar of my coat close. The trouble at work has slowed everything, left me walking the country lanes later than usual, daydreaming of dragons. I pause at an iron gate and consider the shortcut through its field. I have seen the silhouetted rabbits taking it against the sunrise, leaping from the narrow road, and thrusting themselves through the hedge.

Hoisting myself up, I use the extra height to study the field beyond. But where the path through was once bright, glittering with dawn frost, now it blurs in a papyrus overcast, quickly absorbing the inks of night. On such a dull evening, I will soon be relying on the torch in my pocket.

I struggle over the gate, begin towards a line of swaying trees, creaking and shuddering in the evening air. Somewhere beneath them hides the rotten grey stile, the one I usually pass by in the adjacent lane. I will it from the twilight, beginning to count rabbit holes between us. Their occupants will be rousing beneath, little commas curled tight in the ground, readying to unfold and race the length of the field. It reminds me how I am slow, too slow for the descending night, as slow as my income, never enough for a car.

I think of my immaculate twin brother, Ri, who has two cars. Eight hours ahead, he will be enclosed by China's glittering skyscrapers. Several winking floors high, he will be resting after another busy day in Tianjin's food street. He fits seamlessly into those surging modern crowds, sampling strips of crispy Caoji donkey meat, nodding to the vendor but reassuring his business partner, Zengrui: '*Our restaurant makes better.*' His smile flashes in memory, teeth as bleached as his starched shirts.

This is the big life, told in small lines, on the back of irregular postcards. On them I glimpse night views of the Hai River, cobalt and kaleidoscoping the city skyline; the vast glowing facade of the Xikai Church; sweeping angles of brickwork along the Huangya Pass. Such bright scenes glare from the plain shelf in my small rented room. The handwriting on their backs is sedate, square, and as precise as a typewriter. But the English is lazy, neglected by disuse. The postcard of lanterns along Wenhua Street states: *Amazing books and tea selling here, so expensive. Very busy. We walk all day and use all money. Zengrui eat too many sugar chestnut. Found this also. Your brother, Ri.* There was a brown parcel attached containing a clay figure, now used to prop up another more recent card depicting the peaks of Mount Panshan. This one reads: *So beautiful place. Many tourists. Funny boulder shaped like Buddha. Missed bus home but not caring. Great adventure. Your*

*brother, Ri. The card next to it, the most recent, shows the pavilions and bridges of People's Park: Zoo here so fun. Park peaceful with lake and trees. Zengrui find peacock very old—he all white! I take you here one day. Speak telephone? Your brother, Ri.*

Walking this muddy field, I try to imagine I am stepping into my brother's city of sugared chestnuts and white peacocks or strolling in People's Park with people as refined as clay figures. But I feel immediately foolish. I wonder if there is mud and the smell of cows, icy winds and socks worn to holes from walking, in faraway Tianjin. And I secretly wish for a brother who is nearer and perhaps not so faultless, not so at ease with his surroundings, as though they were moulded to him and not the other way around.

I reach the stile but find only another stretch of mud beyond it. I sigh and bring out the torch, hold its light steady as moths soon begin to dart, kissing the tip and then swooning away. My breath churns inside the beam as I hurry on. Ahead, the faint silhouettes of hills are barely visible now within a break of cloud and emerging stars.

Something swoops and squeaks overhead. Just a bat. I stumble. My grip tightens as I quicken my pace, trying to think about something else.

But instead my mind begins recalling local stories about lost sheep picked clean by crows.

I try to distract myself by counting my footsteps—something Ri would do—only to stumble again and find footing just in time. A mysterious creature stirs in the hedge. Just a pheasant?

I begin to think it was unwise to leave work so late.

The Red Dragon pub was busy tonight. The miserable man in the red puffer jacket managed to play 'Moon River' on the old jukebox only twice; his reign of terror may be over. And there was another man, smelling of silage, with flashes of black fillings when he laughed. He ended up sitting with the white-haired cackler, straw and feathers clinging to her cardigan. In a loud voice, she was insisting the geese weren't fattening and: 'This cold was to blame.' Then she went on to recite the weather for the last eight seasons, a group of old men nodding and circling, mumbling along to the facts. A patron in an old Dai cap decided she deserved a drink (cranberry juice, no ice). The man in the red puffer jacket looked up from the jukebox only to complain: 'Add a kick o' gin or it's as good as water!'

He was outside at closing time, clumsily mounting an enormous tractor. A morose old collie awaited him, left to guard the driver's compartment. That was when he made a long complaint about missing, soon 'taken', keys. The evening stretched on and on, hard words and harder threats thrown around, as they searched the pub. But just as the blame edged towards the 'new duck', the 'outsider', his friend in the Dai cap luckily returned with something winking from beneath it.

Yet the distrustful words remain, echoing, in my mind. This is a close village; everyone in everyone else's business. Everyone except the "new duck", the Chinese outsider, 'From away, she is!'

A sudden movement in the hedge jolts me from thinking, something too loud to be a pheasant.

'H-hello?' I say into the darkness.

No reply.

A fox? This idea is no comfort. Foxes bring bad luck, or so Mama often told Ri and I. Running the light along the ground ahead, I double my pace. If I can just reach the edge of the field, I can—

'Why are you wearing a green coat?' comes a loud voice.

Spinning around, I manage to stifle a scream within my scarf: 'Who's there?' I say, searching with the torch.

It abruptly illuminates a slim figure, standing back in the path as though I have just walked through him.

'Hello? W-what did you say?'

'I said,' the man repeats simply, 'why are you wearing a green coat? That's what I want to know. Is it yours? Has it always been yours? Since before you moved here?'

'Yes, this coat is mine.' I feel myself turning crimson. This must be a man from the village, perhaps one of the pub's patrons? 'Sorry,' I add foolishly, as an afterthought. The coat was an expensive-looking gift from Ri. The incident with the missing keys resurfaces. Does this man think I have stolen the coat too? *Has he followed me from the pub?*

I consider the stranger, uneasily. He is younger than I first supposed. I could now guess closer to my own age, somewhere in his twenties, judging by the thick dark hair and eyebrows nestled beneath a deerstalker hat. He seems to be busily taking in my response, glancing everywhere except my face.

'Is that scarf yours?' he now says.

'Yes.'

While he appears harmless, I try to think of an excuse to leave. After all, where did he come from? The only way he could have appeared so suddenly was if he was hiding in the nearby hedge. But that couldn't be true.

'Has it always been yours?'

'Yes.'

'For how long? How long has it been yours?'

'I think a year. I don't know.'

He looks disappointed by my answer. I wonder if he will go now, revealing some clue to his hiding place earlier. It seems he could be considering the same problem; he begins rubbing his own scarf across his chin, agitatedly, glancing around as though waiting for some assistance.

'This scarf mine,' he says after a moment. 'It's been mine for twenty-three days. My birthday was twenty-three days ago. When is *your* birthday?'

'I have to go now,' I say hastily, 'I am expected home from work.'

'Where do you work?' he says immediately. 'How long have you worked there? Is it longer than twenty-three days?'

'Yes—I mean, *no*. I'm not very sure. Goodbye.' I start to walk away quickly, only to find he is walking along beside me, intently watching my legs and purposefully keeping their pace. 'Why are you following me, sorry?'

'So you can hear me,' he replies frankly.

'I'm late,' I insist, shaking my head. 'I can't talk to you right now.'

'How late? How many minutes are you late?'

'I don't know,' I say hurriedly, 'a lot, I think.'

'Why do you keep saying *I think*? Do you always do that?'

'No! Well sometimes, I think—I mean—I *don't know*!'

'Why not?'

'Who are you?' I demand, stopping suddenly.

We have finally arrived at the stile leading into my lane, the familiar old stone wall meandering from it. I feel bolder, confident that a cry for help might be heard in the cottages nearby, if this man turns out to be even more persistent.

'You don't know who I am?'

'No,' I say, certain now that we have never met before. 'Who are you?'

He stares blankly for a moment, as though I have struck him.

'You asked *me* a lot of questions,' I mumble, apologetic.

But he is hastily glancing across the field, as though he expects someone to be coming through it. I wonder how he can see anything in the dark.

'Will it rain tonight?' he asks suddenly. 'And when I see you tomorrow, will it be raining?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you think it will rain for a week? Do you think everything will flood and drown two of Gethin's cows again? I don't like cows. Do you like cows?'

He waits, expectantly.

'Mm...'

'Tomorrow it won't be raining, will it? When I see you tomorrow, it'll be dry?'

'I'm going home now.'

He stares at me again with his large, unblinking blue eyes. 'Tomorrow, will you remember? Say: *good morning Rolant, how are you?*'

Before I can answer, he immediately turns and dashes across the field, as though he is one of the rabbits.

Watching him go, vanish into the opposite hedge, I feel strange, as if I have invited some evil luck by wishing for a different brother, wishing to fill a space belonging honourably to another.

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In the Year of the Dragon, between two thin banks, the little wooden fishing boat is pressed deep like a pin in the water. Within its skeletal frame two silhouettes struggle. One is sprung on its back like a frog, the pronged legs mobile in the air, the other squats, hands hidden. A white crane looks on.

This is my birth, or at least the story Baba's folding book tells, in scratches and washes of his ebony ink. Its paper squares expand, fall open as though links of photographs hanging from a businessman's wallet. They show unknown faces, lost destinations, his secret departures.

I can imagine his hand commanding the straight, bold strokes of a clouded rooftop siheyuan, tracing the oblique eye of the crane, a wrist flick for its leg stippling the current. These slashes of pitch speak the lonely language of heritage, what has been lost and can find no return for us.

Mama firmly weaves my hair. She pretends not to notice the book in my lap. But when I continue to gaze into the boat, her hands suddenly stop, the braid falls, unfinished. She jabs a short finger at her inked self, disturbing the tranquil river once more with her shrill voice.

'Foolish pictures!' she tells my younger self, 'I remember only pain... enough to think I will die! Then came your brother.'

I hold the unfinished braid to my mouth, running the other hand across the pale strokes of water. Mama slaps and the hand recoils.

'Aiyah! Always wasting your head on this thinking. He was a bad fisherman; and a *very* bad miner!' The stinging fingers wander to the second figure in the boat, tips following the lines of a small sharp hat. Mama blows air hard through her nose. 'Gundan! Go light your sticks for him then, stupid girl.'

The pages start to fold, *snap, snap, snap*, but a finger suddenly strikes their paper hard. It pierces the crane's eye, the nail making a serrated impression. I look up hopefully. Mama has remembered some truth, an ancestral spirit has her ear.

'That,' she says poignantly. 'That was not there.'

I gaze at the crane and nod. A child can believe this is a beginning. One day she will speak kindly of Baba again. We will be more than a family of fading ink.

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Street lamps have appeared up ahead, illuminating a row of stippled cottages with carved names on their gates. As I approach the one marked Bedlinog, its Alsatian stirs.

‘Hurruf?’ his glistening nose booms through the slats.

‘Just Miao.’

He gambols away, claws clicking up the drive. He pauses beneath his corrugated iron kennel. ‘Hurruf!’ he states and his eyes momentarily catch the lights, strange opaque discs of amber. Then suddenly they are extinguished. I hear his thick mass collapse to the earth.

And I continue to Llwynypia, struggling with the rusting latch. The cottage appears less well kept than the others, with its mossy shingles and driveway interrupted by weeds.

Inside, I am met by a message winking on the machine. My heart leaps; is it Ri? His last postcard said he would try and call again. The time difference eludes us both. We miss each other. ‘*Like ships in the night,*’ my landlady Rhosyn says, before deleting his messages forever.

My heart sinks when I hear the droning voice of my stepfather, the honourable teacher, instead.

—BEEP—

*‘Hello? Miao? Oh, is it on? Yes, think it is now. Miao, hope you have been making yourself useful to my old friend Rhosyn. Remember you are her lodger, not a houseguest! She expects rent again on the fifth. See the pub pays you on time. My cousin Addfwyn there already has the account details. Calling to also remind you about the tomato plants. My holiday is a good few weeks; they will really need frequent watering while I am away. Unless I hear otherwise, I shall drop them off on my way to the coast on the twenty-fifth. That’s tomorrow morning. Expect them on the twenty-fifth then.’*

—BEEP—

I could just ignore this request, pretend I missed it. After all, I have not forgotten why Mama left this second husband. Yet a strange sense of filial duty still ties me to him. And he did find me these new lodgings, a new job. He could have just departed like the others, set out to begin his own new life, without looking back...

I hook my wellingtons off by their heels, letting them topple muddy and sideways, tiptoe the cold stones of the kitchen, until I reach carpet.

The living room is all shadows, my own slinking through them, the blinds creating glowing bars, a prism of cages cast across the room. The grandfather clock ticks soberly in the corner. Something stirs upstairs.

*Is Rhosyn still awake?* I reverse into the kitchen, count the empty bottles in the recycling box. They confirm my new landlady will not be up before midday again.

Upstairs, I pry open the bedroom door adjacent to hers, resembling more the entrance to a cupboard. I silently close it behind me and then step the curling wooden staircase, rising into the low attic space above. Beneath the eaves, there is just space for my single iron bed frame, a small wash basin, and several unpacked cardboard boxes.

I wander in, aimlessly at first. I pick up a few trinkets, put them down again, only to pick up something else. Eventually, wrapped in a patchwork quilt, I sit on the

bed and slide a tin of shortbread from its hiding place. Cross-legged and, forgetting thoughts of real food, I chew the dry biscuits.

Through the skylight, the night has cleared and stars are vivid. I can glimpse Dipper Mother, Dou Mu, her iridescent trail of shimmering lotus buds forming the constellation. My own mother could be looking up at this too, somewhere in the balmy expanse of China.

And I return to that place, amid the noise of an airport concourse, to the last time her obsidian gaze cast itself across me, dividing me and keeping me at once. Departure times unfold endlessly on the displays before us. Mama's small, careworn hands are secure around her bag. Will they ever touch mine again, even in anger? Slaps would sting less than silence. I think that the honourable teacher will march in and have his last word about the divorce, or at least receive hers. But he does not come.

Then the boarding announcement arrives.

The quilt has fallen from my shoulders and I am at the shelf, staring at a cold clay figure, a bundle of letters from Ri at its back. I look into the figure's pale face, through it, into the airport where I stand with my mother, as motionless as a statue.

We have reached the gaping hole, the gate. She has turned to me, to speak at last. A familiar dirge hums in my ears. Her mouth opens. My hands wipe my cheeks. I lean in.

'Miao,' she says simply and quoting Lao-tzu: *'have few desires.'*

With this, she walks steadily away, disappears into the dark tunnel of the boarding bridge, leaving only echoes of her final words, resounding.

I snatch the Clay Figure Zhang from the shelf. The figure smiles serenely, bowing, his gold and vermilion mianfu glinting. This expectant posture suggests his secret: he has a twin, a mate, family somewhere. His other half is a beautiful Ming Dynasty empress in diyi and a cerulean phoenix crown. Somewhere in Tianjin, she is smiling too, adorned in kingfisher feathers and dragons, also leaning forwards in happy expectation.

Both must bend daily to the empty space in which the other half once stood. Will this be the way of things forever? Ri possesses the empress in China, I the emperor in Wales. Neither can look upon the other. And yet the figures of clay maintain their smiles, as though content to fill the space with other things.

Returning the emperor to the shelf, I think I must understand how to do the same. I push him back, pressing Ri's postcards against the wall into a tight stack. And slowly I turn the emperor's face towards them, as though his eyes can look right through their thick paper, the inked words behind, and as if he is bowing down to reach something much deeper within.

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The water is a grey reflection in the eyes of my twin brother Ri, barefoot and squatting like Buddha, balancing at the edge of the pool.

He rolls two chalk-white stones from one hand to the other. These chimeless Baoding scrape and scratch, scrape and scratch, between bitten dirty nails. He is counting. His lips squirm and twitch like the grass carp below. He will mutter and ignore me until she returns. If she returns.

Strangers step around us or blindly stumble into our sides, as though we are but rocks in the same rush of water. I pick the dewy blossom from folds in my worn clothes. Rolling the petals into a fist, I then lace the face of the stream with a tree peony veil. A carp momentarily regards it with one yellow, orbicular eye. There is a



twitch of scales and then only emptiness and weeds. A ripple expands and fades before it reaches the bank.

How often my mind returns to wander this friendless, yet gentle, garden. Its trees grow in a place without age or time, the yearning for Mama to return blowing through it like a wind, stripping the branches of blossom. Buds roll the empty paths which lead to nowhere, places unexplored, incomplete.

A strong memory, like a storm, often remains clearest at the centre and this world turns around a fear, the knowing that everything abandons the garden at night...

A man on a blue bicycle rings his bell across the faded moon bridge, vanishing. The cinnamon-coloured sparrows peep and scatter, their stubby beaks squabbling. Laughter echoes and disappears beneath the red pavilion.

Then on the edge of the pool floats a shadow, gradually closer. It rides the eddies, a ghostly white belly pressing the surface. Fins flop and bob. Rigid as a branch, the body of the old carp drifts nearer the edge.

Repulsed and excited, I reach from the bank. It comes closer, lagging on weeds, limply revolving. The cloisonné bracelet at my wrist lags in the water; I feel the frozen touch of the current.

But suddenly there are feet at my side. One kicks me sharply in the gut. 'Heh! You want to drown?'

Doubling, for a moment I see my reflection in the water, growing closer, but manage to save my balance. Mama has returned, smelling of her usual clove cigarettes and something else.

'Mount Penglai climbed?' Ri demands, shouldering me aside. I almost fall again. 'You saw the winterless mountain?'

'Climbed,' Mama repeats slowly, pink as Mudan. 'I drank in the majestic lights and gold!' she laughs, too loudly. 'I walked the infinite face of the Silver River. There are colours, white you can touch, squeeze like rice. Finest jade hangs from every tree... such trees.'

Ri smiles in wonder. But I cannot believe. When she speaks this way, I twist and crawl. Her wild voice echoes through the garden. Shame slithers in like a sickness, spreading through my stomach.

I take her arm and point to the shadow in the water.

'Fish?' I ask her. 'Wake it up.'

She sees the bundle of scales, nodding in the current. Lazily, she touches a finger to her nose and says: 'It is going down... down to wander Diyu with your Baba.'

The body travels on in a strange procession downstream. Such loneliness in this journey. The creeping hand, seeking another's, is customarily slapped away.

'Aiyah! Dirty hands, xiaopang!'

'Speak of Mount Penglai!' Ri is demanding, the villain at her sleeve.

Her eyes have dulled. She says only, 'I tasted the paradise water again.' Her gaze becomes menacing. A fool might press her, but Ri nods and we walk on.

In my memory I try to connect us somehow, by our arms and hands, like paper dolls. Yet we are always separate, bound only by a common direction; we wander to her preferred place beneath the weeping plum tree.

There Mama sways and sings yuefu, dishonourably forgetting words. She bends the rods of branches to her mouth, breathing deeply the spicy pink meihua, until the branches break in her hands.

I see Ri try to take her arm but he is still not tall enough. I try to take Ri's arm but he pulls it away. Mama sways like she is a plum tree too.

Soon men with stern faces begin to stare us into stillness, into disgrace. They stride over in their official clothes. They ask Mama questions about shame and we listen and listen. Until they ask after Baba. And suddenly Mama's mouth is a calligraphic line, so dark and straight it will never bend or open again. I feel ashamed for all of us, back to the very first ancestor.

Ri speaks, his modest voice says only 'guafu', widow, and reaches, takes her by the arm. He steers and she follows at last.

We walk until trees and water and men are but memories in the horizon's moving clouds. We are going home. Baba will not be waiting, this I have come to understand. The old bamboo pole leans at the door, untouched. I can keep Baba's glasses because he will not need them for his reading again.

Mama lights the last of the incense next to his photograph.

'I have tasted the paradise water,' she tells us once more before sleep. Swaying wretchedly, she kisses us both. And we smell the stinging nectar at her throat.



I cut across the fields again this morning, glancing half at the hedge and half at my watch. I couldn't help being curious as to whether the strange man, Rolant, would reappear as promised. Though I would not have time to stop for his questions; it was told to me firmly that the locals liked things *on time*.

'They're true farmer's boyos!' my boss Addfwyn insisted from the first day. 'Now, that means they're working to a schedule like. They've got the hours of daylight to get those cows down the bottom field and they don't walk themselves, an' they got *the bull* to worry about—nasty thing he is—oooo you won't want to be keepin' *him* waiting, he's already knocked down two o' the boys and oh he went for the third. Mind the third was from Pencraig Farm and theys quicker on their feet that lot are, see? Yes, bach, it pays to be a quickun' round here.'

While I anticipated seeing Rolant again, running rabbit-like, or bursting from the deeper patches in the hedgerow, I saw no one. I thought I might pass him in the village but it was early and the roads were empty but for a solitary goose, honking its way back to one of the farms.

Entering The Red Dragon now, I even half expect to see him inside. However the small bar area is silent and still, smelling faintly of wood smoke from the burner. As I hang up my coat, I consider what made him question whether it was mine. Then again, he seemed to ask questions about everything.

I go through into the kitchen and find Addfwyn flushed and busily unscrewing jars of shrivelled cockles. The strong smell of overcooked seaweed, heaped black and glistening on the tabletop, lingers and reminds me of Mama's bitter zicai soups.

'Bore da, bach!' Addfwyn calls, hearing me enter. 'Get that pinny on! Ooo you wouldn't believe the time I've had of it this mornin'. Thought I put those weeds in for a six hour but did I switch on the oven? *Did I cariad!* Boyos will be savage with me if they taste it's touched the microwave. They'll be saying: *there's a funny tawch on this Addfwyn*, you'll see!'

She quickly seizes the cotton apron I'm struggling to tie and begins to rope me in. 'Now, I'll poach the cockles in the big pot see and you'll be grating cheese in those breadcrumbs. Don't be too shy with it either; Gethin don't like it mild. All that drinking can make you just like that, see? Insides get soft and you can't taste much, even less digest it. He says to me only the other day, he says: *Addfwyn the turkey from Pencraig was lovely, beautifully cooked, Addfwyn it was beautiful!* But I'm not bein' funny like; he couldn't taste a bit of it. He *has* to be polite see because I'm the only one left buyin' his lamb or beef at Christmas instead of a famous Pencraig turkey! I tell you, he has a hard life but not making it any easier on himself by drinkin'.'

She starts hurling handfuls of wrinkly cockles in a pan. 'Tough boyos, the lot of them. They'll be out on the big field with it emptying down and then one by one they come in here, water in their teeth like, because not one of them ever has a hot meal waiting at home, I promise you!'

She shakes a wooden spoon at my chest: 'The things I could tell you, my girl! Make your hair curl, it would. Not one of them has luck with wives. Just when you think they—oh, what now!' She wrenches at the hot water tap, it shudders reluctantly on. 'I won't tell you nothin' like but few winters back Owen's wife went and I said to myself it was too sudden. I said *it's sudden!*' She brandishes the spoon again. 'Now when she came in here you could tell she was contrary like, feet wiped twice see? You only so much as say good afternoon and she'd argue! Young Tomos and little Osian, bless his heart, they were always wanting. Mucky little things; not a grain touched their washing. And when she walked out, those little darlins', oh I would have taken them in myself! Owen left alone with two young boys and a farm to work—*pam fi duw* he was cryin—you can bet he was!'

She slams the pan on the hob. 'And Gethin is no better off. I'm not one to spread stories but he never got over what happened with his father. Never! Tried a shortcut to his sheep field and there he was: gone! Swallow holes got him.'

'Swallow holes?'

'Sinkholes, lovee. Forest used to be thick with 'em! And Gethin's father should have known it. Sucked him right up it did, leaving his family nothing but his hat! So Gethin wears that Dai cap down hard like, thinking he's tidy, but we all know it's because his hair is gone. Always used to try and get his feet under the table with the valley girls but now look at him: head like a chicken's egg, *a chicken's egg!*'

I find myself wondering about Rolant, running around in the dark. Does he know about the sinkholes?

'Do you know Rolant?' I say, trying to sound casual.

'Ooooooa!' She turns from the hob, eyes large. 'You met Rolant did you, bach? Now isn't he a funny one? Met him, did you? Stopped you, did he? Took a shine to you like?'

'No,' I say hastily, 'he only wanted to know about my coat. I told him and he ran into the—I mean,' I stare hard at the cheese. 'Home, I think.'

'Oooooa, fancied your coat did he?' she rubs her hands together, chuckling impishly. 'Boy like that doesn't find friends easy, see? No matter to him though; in his own world for most! Won't be heading home though, bach; stays down on that *Dyffryn Tŷ Farm* he does.'

'Diff...'

She briskly whips the breadcrumbs away from me, where I've created a mountainous pile of cheese. 'Dyffryn Tŷ Farm! They keep to themselves mostly see? Farm was bought up at the end of the war, place for twp folk ever since! Made one of the old townie evacuees boss of them all. Garlic butter in the fridge, bach!' she barks, returning to the boiling pan. 'Few clever sorts come up to the farm shop now and then but they can't be bringing all of them like.'

'All of them? His family?'

'Now I really won't say anything but the family have not a bit to do with him. One of the better ones but they still won't keep him home. Used to come visiting here until all the trouble with the sister happened. Disappeared like a smoke she did! Parents stayed a while in my best room while the business dragged on. I remember the mother took one bite of the rarebit and not a bit more! Well-heeled as anything she was and the father was all tidy clothes too but never a bit of please or thank you to me. Now there's terrible isn't it? Lose one child, leave the other, and then not a bit of good appetite or manners for us locals. Noses in the fire the pair of them!'

Inwardly I wonder if she is thinking the same about my own family, disappearing not unlike smoke too. What was it that her distant cousin, the honourable teacher, said about the sudden divorce? Perhaps she has guessed that we

seldom speak and my own 'well-heeled' mother has abandoned me. I feel myself flushing at the thought of her pity.

'Rolant does have people to look after him then?'

'Oh yes,' she says, slamming the pot down loudly next to me, making me flinch. '*Companions* they call themselves. Living right there with 'em and looking after some right poor dabs they are too. Gammy legs, wonky eyes, chronic everything; you name it, they have it! All got their different ways about 'em. One took off and hid in Gethin's barn the once. Funny little dwt of a thing she was. Went in to get feed for the cows and he could hear her laughing to herself like. Hid in those bales like it was nothing! And there he was calling out to her: *I know you are in there, I seen you coming out!* And then out she came, smiling and everything! Well would you believe it? I said to him: *Gethin, I hope you were sharp with her. A girl like that needs to know she isn't to go running about a working farm.* But Gethin couldn't understand it. And I told him: *Gethin, you've got to know she wasn't born your side of the bridge. You've got to be strict with 'em or you'll have a barn full of them—full of them next time Gethin!* Well, he didn't like the sound of that. You do have to watch how you speak to that lot see? Some here will even tell you Dyffryn Tŷ Farm is all cawl cabbage but see this spoon?'

She brings it up to my face, dripping with cockle water. 'Now *they* made me this spoon! They have their own little woodshop and they make some nice things in it. Now some might say to me: *Oh Addfwyn, fancy buying all that cheap tack!* And I look them in the eye and say: *mind your own!* Can't convince me they are all twp as a sledge when they can make tidy things like this. Better the likes of those in Dyffryn Tŷ were good and busy.'

I nod. 'It's good he is busy.'

'Hand me the Bara Lawr, bach.'

Addfwyn begins heaping the glistening laverbread into the bottom of a large dish, humming to herself. Watching her, my mind wanders to Dyffryn Tŷ, imagining Rolant, whittling and sanding spoons all day. And I question what he was doing in the field at night, what really made him stop me. That expectant look across a dewy field, was it for his distant parents?

'So he'll just live there... forever?' I find myself thinking aloud.

'Some too tapped to live on their own, that's for sure,' she sighs, sprinkling cockles into the dish. 'They have those companions there minding 'em and making sure they come to no harm. They say they don't even pay 'em but Aderyn Craddock is boss of 'em all and never seems short of money when she comes in. Bit of a hard woman if you ask me. Likes her tea like the leg of a stool and to be left to drink it in peace; not too social! But that lot likely need a firm hand to keep their farm goin'! Now, you help me with frying some bacon, bach. We've got to get this under the grill quick.'

We hurriedly layer the breadcrumbs, followed by bacon, before Addfwyn uses her precious spoon to crown it with garlic butter. No sooner is it under the grill, than we hear the bar door creak open.

'Bore da?' bellows the familiar voice of Dai cap.

'Pam fi duw! Gethin's early!' Addfwyn moans. 'Go entertain him while I finish things.'

I nod, with a sinking feeling.

'Bore da,' Gethin says as I walk out behind the small bar. 'Don't you worry, Owen's got his keys today.' He taps his hat and winks.

'Tea?'

'Not for me duck. Breakfast out soon?'

‘Five minutes?’

‘Right-o.’ He coughs. ‘Well then... say it will be raining nasty later. Hope they’ve got it wrong again.’

‘Yes,’ I nod, trying not to stare at his hat, imagine swallow holes or heads shaped like eggs.

‘Any road, still walking out the cows. They don’t mind the weather...’

‘No.’

Thankfully the door goes again and Puffer Jacket walks soberly in, his dark drawn eyes to the floor.

‘Bore da Owen,’ Gethin nods.

‘Bore da,’ he replies glumly, slumping onto a bar stool.

‘How the boys?’

‘Eldest got a sickener of some bad curry. Tells me he’s in bed.’

‘Well you warned him to stay off! Them foreign Rodneys put all kinds in.’

‘Does what he likes,’ Owen grumbles, ‘like his mam.’

‘Dyed in the wool stubborn is all he is,’ Gethin insists. ‘A shame but it might grow out yet.’

There is a long silence.

‘Tea?’ I ask Owen.

‘Not today.’ Another long pause and then he looks up: ‘Heard you met Rolant out on the west field.’ Reading my surprise, he adds: ‘Not much business stays your own around here.’

‘Rolant?’ Gethin says, eyebrows disappearing into his hat. ‘Don’t say stories now.’

‘We didn’t talk for long,’ I say.

‘Well you be careful now duck, he’s a right one!’ Gethin maintains.

‘E’s one of the better ones I reckon,’ Owen shrugs. ‘Daft. But no harm comes from it.’

I feel myself turning red again, suddenly ashamed for Rolant.

‘He just wanted to ask something,’ I say awkwardly.

‘Oh yes?’ Gethin croons, leaning back in his chair. ‘Under your feet was he? Asking all those questions o’ his? Craddock wants to keep a sharper eye on her lot.’

‘Rolant about on his own not allowed, is it?’ mumbles Owen. ‘Hadn’t thought to say anything to Craddock.’

‘Oh he’s *allowed* right enough. Craddock isn’t very feeling toward him but decided he is quite forward compared with some. Roams around quite freely as I understand it. But perhaps not for the better...’ Gethin throws a glance in my direction.

The two men exchange a deliberate look.

‘He only asked about my coat,’ I insist, not wanting to be the cause of any trouble.

‘That’s the problem with him though; asks one question—,’ begins Owen.

‘But will take you for ten more, if you let him!’ nods Gethin.

Their minds seem set. Yet picturing Rolant, vulnerable in his deerstalker hat, working raw wood into spoons at Dyffryn Tŷ, or meekly hiding in hedgerows, gives me a sinking feeling.

‘Ready!’ Addfwyn cries, appearing with the steaming dish. ‘Fetch me the other plates sharpish, bach; rest will be here in a minute.’

‘Eldest has been down in the town and got a sickener of some bad curry,’ Owen is busily repeating. ‘Won’t be coming from the caravan today.’

I return with the spare warm plates to find the men already set about tearing into the hot cockles and Bara Lawr.

‘Other boyos will only be left with an eyeful if they don’t walk through soon!’ Addfwyn snorts.

‘You hear Rolant been skulking about this one?’ Gethin pipes up.

‘Spouting about that again are we?’ says Addfwyn.

‘That lot get under foot!’ Gethin complains shaking his head.

‘Oh let them be,’ insists Addfwyn, ‘it’s their farm isn’t it? Keep it well, don’t they? Don’t be sprwtin in their business!’

‘Well any more nonsense in *my* barn and I’ll—’

‘Yes, yes!’ Addfwyn sighs, ‘you’ll *square things*.’

‘I think,’ Owen says thickly through a mouthful of food, ‘there’s a funny tawch on the Bara Lawr.’

Gethin, who was busily using the sacred spoon to claim a larger portion, pauses to ask: ‘Do the plates need a quick swill?’

‘That’s all you’re getting, so there for you!’ Addfwyn snaps, snatching the spoon from his hand. ‘Shame on you both and all, being so mean. Manners at Dyffryn Tŷ are what they are but I wouldn’t credit yours any better! Now eat up and sit quiet the both of you.’

‘Right-o.’

‘Right you are.’

As they sit repentantly chewing, Gethin manages to raise his head a little to say, ‘I don’t know for sure about spoons, but I fancy that one is a good, strong ‘un.’

Owen nods earnestly.

I spend the rest of the day drying glasses and wiping taps, preparing the pub for the locals who will be coming to drink, play cards and trade stories through the evening. Addfwyn tries to encourage me to stay on, not to work but to ‘*have a little fun*’. I’d rather wander home alone. My mind is preoccupied, drifting to the fields, where Rolant too may be wandering alone.

\*

There were once nights when they drank together, baijiu pouring from porcelain bottles as red as the creeping dawn. Mama would laugh, because the honourable teacher had ‘never tried’ such new things. In these memories, my child-self wonders what they can be celebrating night after night.

A moon-zither plucks loudly throughout such evenings, rising from a record player the honourable teacher gifted Mama. She is ever pouring and swallowing, retching and laughing, thinking she is Yidi and he is the Immortal of Wine. They play Jiuling, the striking of the dice met with more wild laughter, the shriek of numbers. She always loses. She always drinks.

This goes on until the morning Mama’s Java sparrow is dead in its wire cage. Its pink legs are stiff, still poised as though gripping an unseen perch. Amber eyes shut, red beak open. This is Christmas Day. We know because the honourable teacher has been teaching the students enlightening snow songs for a month.

No one notices the dead bird. I recall sitting with my small chin on the table’s edge, looking in at stillness. Behind a screen door, Mama is still laughing. Everything is a ‘so funny story’.

Usually I could watch that carefree bird, Xiaohong, hop and scratch, and I could forget. The events of a thunderous night were never there in his contented squeaks, bowing and fluttering inside his clay bath. Only I remembered how the

shrill sounds rattled the walls. My chin on the square table, I could watch Xiaohong warble and click, chasing seed with his crimson beak, and wonder whether he had troubles at all.

I did not understand then that Mama was forgetting to feed Xiaohong; her head was filled only with drink and the honourable teacher. She seemed possessed by him. Sometimes, after he was gone, there was a game she would continue to play with me. She would stagger to my door, singing: *'Two small bees, flying in the flowers, fly...'*

If he left early, she would then fall on me, slapping, shouting *'Pya Pya!'* until I was red from her frenzy. If he spoke to her softly, stayed a while, she would uneasily crawl in. The porcelain bottle would roll from her grasp, wetting the sheets. Then she would hold me tight, whispering: *'Mua Mua'*, until her breath was hot and soft and she steadily drifted to sleep.

On Christmas Day, no one noticed Xiaohong was dead; the teacher asked Mama to marry him. The porcelain bottle appeared early in her hand.

I try to forget where this day grows too bitter, as impossible as denying a mouthful of sour plums. I shrivel into my childhood self, creeping silently in the spaces between rooms, my presence undesired in any of them.

I am watching from a doorway. The teacher has to leave early. He takes Mama's hands at the door, his silvery hair wild with sweat, kissing them and singing softly to her about the little bees. He catches me watching, his cheeks suddenly red, voice cunning: *'Where I come from, we'd call you a peeping tom, young lady!'*

I run from his small, hooded eyes with their flickering pale lashes, the eyes of a pig. Hiding in my bed, I can imagine he is squealing and tied in the market or being carried far away in a cart. I can imagine many things but not him living with us, sleeping in Baba's bed, taking his pole from the door.

Later Mama's shadow stretches like a snaggle-toothed Yaoguai in the doorway.

*'Baba was just a coolie!'* she snarls. *'We have chance for real future, far from China, ungrateful Xiaopang.'*

*Xiaopang*, fatty, though I am skinny as straw.

I think she will burst in, singing the little bee song, and slap me until my skin screams—*Pya Pya!*

But that night she simply pulls the door across, slowly, letting the light gradually sieve away. Before she snaps it closed, she says it plainly: *'Xiaohong could not come with us. Well that he died.'*

And the light is gone.

\*

I awake suddenly to the sound of smashing. No light filters through the wooden blinds. Blinking digits on the old clock radio tell me it is only just morning.

I plant my feet squarely on the floor and hear more sounds coming from downstairs. The cool air strikes a chill through me. Taking the dressing gown from the floor, I wrap it around me.

I pad down the first staircase. Sliding on the slippers waiting at the bottom, I silently prise the door open and listen. A blue twilight is streaming along the hallway. And from the kitchen below, the noise continues.

I creep along the hall to Rhosyn's bedroom. The door is already open. Swinging it wider, I find only bars of gloom framing the empty sheets.

Reluctantly, I begin down, each step taking me deeper into the darkness below. Is it too late to turn back and pretend I have slept through it all? Pausing, I



find myself shrinking down, my head against the banisters, suddenly very tired. A myriad of scenes could pass through these redolent wooden frames. Mama and the honourable teacher click tiles at a mah-jong table. Ri flicks his morning congee at the wall. Beef hisses in a pan as Mama wails down a telephone. 'Wan an...' an old woman, my Nai Nai, whispers as she falls asleep forever in the chair. These are the steps, the scenes I know from household stairs.

In the living room, a shaft of indigo illuminates the face of the grandfather clock; it is almost five. I stumble past it, heart quickening.

More glass breaking.

A past echo rings in my ears: 'Pya Pya! Pya Pya!'

'Rhosyn?'

No answer.

I step closer, reaching for the kitchen door, a sliver of light escaping. Something else smashes, shadows of its splinters sounding and skidding across the linoleum. An ominous crackling and popping comes in its wake. I slowly push with my fingertips, near the hinges, keeping my distance, and the scene swings wide and open.

Blood coils like writhing red tentacles across the floor, ice and glass strewn and winking. In the centre there is something flailing and falling, hair at angles and crimson fingertips twisting; the spectre of a woman, dripping in a white nightgown, dances on the glass.

'Rhosyn!' I manage, though my voice merely creaks like the door.

She continues to turn, entranced by the crackle of white noise rising from the radio.

'Stop!' I edge around bloodied glass. 'Rhosyn stop!'

She merely regards me with one red, wild eye. She smiles, strands of faded auburn hair clinging to her teeth. 'C-Can you, can you not h-hear it?' she drawls.

'Hear what?'

'Mhmm... ah, that's the—that's the...'

'You're drunk.'

'Diflas as pechod!' she shrieks. 'This, this is my f... favourite song!'

'Rhosyn your feet,' I plead. 'Just stop! Sit down on—,' I dodge as she swivels nearer, 'the chair!'

I take Rhosyn by the arm and she savagely resists. The attempt fortunately propels her towards the chair, enough that she collapses into it. As I draw her feet up onto the opposite chair, I flinch at the small ribbons of tattered flesh, hanging like weeds from her soles.

She suddenly looks up at me, livid. I think she will strike me. But instead she presses a scarlet finger to my forehead, cold and between my eyes.

'Higsht! L-listen you,' she drawls. 'Dunt come in here like you know the place. Things here no one hears... Not for outsiders to know! So if I... I only sipped just an' eyeful of the red. I 'ad an 'ell of a job finding bottles. You been hiding them! I-I know, don' think I—,' and she descends, gnashing and cursing into Welsh.

I retrieve a broom and begin to sweep the shards together. Beneath the drone of her rambling, the radio's low crackling timbre continues. And for a moment I think I can hear something behind the white noise, a faint murmur, the pulse of something veiled in crackle.

Unsettled, I quickly turn the dial. The radio secures a voice from the popping stillness.

'—the twenty-fifth and it is looking like rain again Tom!'

The twenty-fifth? The honourable teacher and his tomato plants could be here in just a few hours! I close my eyes for a moment, wishing myself back into bed. But when I open them again, long streaks of blood still smear the floor.

In the chair, Rhosyn's head has slumped onto her chest. I grit my teeth hard and continue to sweep.

Most of the morning is spent scrubbing and rinsing and wringing, until I am sure the most unpleasant thing about murder must be the cleaning. My hands begin to feel tight, stinging with bleach.

Sunlight soon creeps, pink and pale at the window. Rhosyn snorts herself awake. Blinking blearily at me, she demands I '*keep the noise down*' before limping irritably upstairs. I run cold water at the sink and splash my aching eyes.

Watching another day stir on the horizon, I suddenly think of my Baba and his love for the sunrise. In his folding book, there is a small wash painting of a red sun coming up over grey mountains and mist. Such delight, the first time I noticed the tiny man atop the furthest mountain. His arms are spread and one leg is raised, engaged in T'ai chi ch'uan, greeting the dawn.

As a child I would sneak after Baba, up to the roof of our building, and watch him stirring the air. Those firm, safe hands would move across his body, serenely tracing the lines of his large frog buttons, pushing away. His palms could move as gracefully as clouds, resolutely drifting down in closing, head turned so as to catch my eyes. He always caught me and always smiled.

I think I see his silhouette now, poised out in the garden, a palm pressed to the chill air. He turns and sees me, the tranquil smile at his lips. I toss the bloodied cloths inside the machine, pat my damp hands and open the door.

Outside the air is crisp and cool. Beams of light filter through hedges and ivy, sparrows dance and skim the lawn. And I stand, palms pushing blood and Rhosyn and glass outwards. Knees bend, arms reach, shaking off pain like fine dew. Shoulders stretch and I turn gradually. I can forget the cut of glass, or slaps, or stares as my hands stroke the sunrise.

It is only later, as I perform the final stretches, that I get the sense that I am no longer alone. I know Rhosyn will be asleep until noon, yet I tingle with a stranger's gaze.

I scan the innocent garden, my stare falling on the thick hedgerow where something twitches.

'I know you're there.'

The face of a young man in a deerstalker hat pokes out. 'How?' it demands. I almost smile, my mouth twitching: 'Luck.'

Beneath him a blackbird hops frantically, awaiting the removal of his head from her nest.

'Have you been wondering where I was?' Rolant asks, pulling himself unceremoniously through. 'Where did you think I was? Did you look for me?'

'I don't know. I have been busy...' I say, backing away slowly so that I am in the kitchen doorway, 'with work.'

His eyes angle into an intense stare at the stone birdbath between us. 'How many hours do you work for?' he seems to ask it.

'A few.'

'Does *a few* mean three?'

'No.'

'Is it eight?'

'No.'

'Nine?'

‘No.’

He looks unsettled by this exchange, brow furrowing as though it does not match with a previous calculation. ‘What were you trying to catch in the garden?’

‘Catch?’

He immediately sticks his hands out awkwardly and begins hopping on one foot. Eyes closed he kicks out from the ankle, arms like a shaky mantis. I try not to laugh.

‘Tai chi?’

‘Does it look like this? Am I doing it?’

He clumsily fans and pulls the air as though dragging and resisting an unseen being.

‘I think...’ I regard his self-conscious balancing, almost falling as he turns again, ‘that’s good, for a beginner.’

‘As good as you? Better than you? When will I do it like you?’

I consider the answer for a moment and then select something Baba would say: ‘With discipline, you will grow.’

‘Grow? You have to grow things first? Like tomatoes on your doorstep? Blocking the door? Should visitors come to the back door instead, like I did?’

Walking slowly around the side of the cottage, my heart begins to sink. Rolant follows behind, a wild shadow demanding further answers. The honourable teacher will at least have left a note, some *token*, of gratitude or feeling.

Yet when I arrive at the door, I find only spindly plants growing like weeds against the chaos of questions.

\*

We sit silently at the plastic garden set, tomato plants between us. Blackbirds hop in the hedgerow. Somewhere, a lawnmower rumbles up and down, up and down. We listen uncomfortably, until it is replaced only with the smell of newly cut grass.

Rolant, who has been sitting absentmindedly pinching his hand with a clothes peg, finally coughs and throws it under the table. He glances at the tomatoes restlessly, as though suspecting they are the cause of my red eyes and silence.

‘What’s your favourite food?’ he asks finally. ‘Not tomatoes?’

‘He didn’t say a thing,’ I find myself telling him, ‘he didn’t have tea or...’

My face reddens.

‘What about this?’ Rolant awkwardly takes one of the plants and tips it up, revealing the soiled note: ‘*May need re-potting*’.

‘He could have stayed to tell me that.’

‘Shall I tell you it?’

‘I don’t think you understand.’

‘No...’ he mumbles, shrinking in his chair.

I stare at the clothes peg beneath the table. Rolant’s hand twitches on his knee. It is still pocked with little angry pinch marks.

‘Rolant, do *you* drink tea?’

A long silence, he bites his lip and glances around, as though for assistance.

‘I’ll make tea and you could come in?’ I suggest. ‘If you are allowed—I mean, *drink* tea.’

‘Hm...’ he says and doesn’t move.

Walking to the kitchen door, I open it pointedly wide and step inside. He remains sitting, facing the wrong way to see my performance. Annoyance stirs like a snake in my belly.

‘Are you coming in?’ I call from the window.

Immediately jumping up, he hurries sheepishly inside: 'Is it ready now?'  
 'No.'  
 'How long before it is ready? How many minutes?'  
 'I—'  
 'What is the depth of the cups? How many cups are there? Do you have red cups? Are there—'  
 'I don't know!' I say, walking wearily to the counter.  
 Seizing the upside-down teabag tin, the silver lid spins off like a frisbee. From within shoots a collection of acrid smelling cigarette butts. They bounce and pepper the newly cleaned floor, ash skittering into shapes like tiny, grey sand paintings.  
 'Was that supposed to happen?' Rolant wants to know.  
 Staring into the hollow tin, I am suddenly relieved the honourable teacher did not stay. I lean against the counter. 'There is no tea,' I conclude heavily.  
 'We have tea.'  
 'No we *don't*!' I maintain, shaking the empty tin at him. 'Can't you see? Rhosyn drank it all and then filled it with these!' I say, suddenly angry, finding myself stamping on the butts.  
 'Why?'  
 'Because she is a drunk! *Zuìguì!* You see the bottles? *All hers! Her-bottles-her mess-all-hers-all—*'  
 Seething, my slippers grind the ashes into the floor.  
 I can feel Rolant watching, curiously. The cool, seamless pressure of his gaze allows me to carry on stamping for some time.  
 When finally I look up, there is a brief impulse to throw my arms around him. But the sensation dissipates the moment I connect with his docile stare, as placid as an old dog, watching the necessary madness of his master.  
 The tin is replaced, shamefacedly, on the counter.  
 'We have tea,' Rolant says flatly, 'at Dyffryn Tŷ. Could you walk there?' He regards my grubby slippers. 'Do you have outdoor shoes?'  
 'I have wellingtons. Behind you.'  
 'Do you need help putting them on?'  
 'I think I can do it.'  
 'Should I wait outside while you change?'  
 'If you want to,' I murmur, suspecting he needs this excuse to leave.  
 When he shuffles from the room, I put the wellingtons on slowly, my face hot. I am surprised when I finally step out to find him dutifully waiting, a tomato plant in each hand.  
 'Are you going to repot them today?' he says. 'Can we use Dyffryn Tŷ pots?'  
 'Yes, thank you.'  
 Perhaps a visit to Rolant's farm will repair things; I cannot know if my outburst has disturbed him, struck him like crossfire. His own family problems, apparently the thing of local legend, could be somewhere behind the tranquil blue of those eyes. I reluctantly glance at the clothes peg's fading pinch marks. What did Addfwyn mean exactly about his parents *losing* one child and leaving the other?  
 Suddenly there is a screeching sound from above, as an upstairs window swings violently open.  
 'Got a headache chronic in here... *agony!*' a voice wails from inside. Rhosyn's drawn face appears like a phantom in the gap between frosted glass and stained wall.  
 'Rolant? *Rolant!* So you're the article making all that noise?'  
 'Why do you keep burnt bits in your tea tin?' Rolant calls up.

‘What’s this one been saying about me?’ cries Rhosyn. ‘That lodger o’ mine is like you: all jaw! She’s from away, you can see that in her face! Don’t you two dare go spreadin’ stories about me now! I done nothing to nobody.’

‘Do you need new pots?’ he continues. ‘Pots for burnt bits? Pots from Dyffryn Tŷ?’

‘Ah will ‘e ever alter?’ shrieks Rhosyn. Her gnarled hand directly appears in the crack, hurling the soap dish. With a clatter, it lands and settles on the stone slabs in front of us. ‘Now take that and stop aggravating me with your questions!’

The window slams shut. We stare blankly at the soap dish. Rolant appears to be fighting an impulse to claim it. The air rings in the wake of Rhosyn’s shrill voice, a heaviness seeming to weigh about the cottage. I feel my face burning again.

But Rolant simply turns and leads the way to the hedge. I follow, grateful he appears disinterested in questioning the incident. He crawls into the hedge unperturbed. Clambering after him, I try not to disturb the blackbird’s nest, envying it the luxury of flying anywhere and living where it chooses.

The leaves soon part to reveal a large sheep field. As we emerge, its flock stare at us, grass turning in their mouths. I struggle to my feet to find Rolant is already striding ahead. At the opposite side of the field, grizzled pieces of wool cling in a barbed fence, trailing in the morning breeze. Rolant leads the way to a low stile. Then carefully placing the tomato plants ahead of him, he ascends its wooden step.

I attempt to do the same, having to hold the post with both hands for balance. My wellingtons tiptoe the slats, failing to grip. Straddling it now, I hastily lean forwards, trying to swing both legs at the same time. I spin on the post, flailing. Both feet gracelessly thud to the ground. Straightening, I brush moss from my coat, laughing uneasily. Yet when I turn to face Rolant, I find he is watching as coolly as the sheep.

In the shadow of the dragon hills, we descend the hedged slope, empty but for a few Rowan trees, their spindly hands holding the direction of the wind. The silence, but for our footfall and distant sheep, allows my thoughts to slowly drift.

I imagine us both from a distance: a scene in a pair of binoculars. Just two people out for a walk with their tomato plants. What would the locals in The Red Dragon think? ‘*Yes, I went to have tea with him, with Rolant, the man you all think is so strange...*’

Still, a kind of despairing trust seems to trail between us like an invisible rope, unexpected, and pulling me after and onwards. It is a feeling not unlike the one of pursuing Ri and Mama beneath the plum trees. People thought us strange too then. I glance at Rolant, noticing the way the ears of his hat comically flap as he walks, and wonder if he might look better without it. Then turning back to the rolling landscape, I consider how he has been kind to me. Not without shame, I realise after everything, strange or not, I am quite hungry for kindness.

We go on to cross the mudded verges of the crop fields, studded with their trip-you-up rocks. Noiselessly we pause at a rusting bridge with red railings to look over, but find only a dribble of stream and brambles below. We seem to just walk on and on with a fixed and natural motion, the squawking of the rookeries and the breath of the wind leisurely becoming the native language between us.

After a time, we find our way onto a gravel track. Tall weeds at either side twitch with insects, a compost smell drifting on the breeze. The track remains empty, disturbed only briefly by a bold and very fat pheasant necking across.

Eventually the track tapers, ends outside a low L-shaped building, a corrugated roof covered in black skeletal leaves. We stop outside, and I regard the

three narrow parking spaces, two marked disabled. At the door is a wonky shrub in a terracotta pot, a kind of lopsided ambassador welcoming us.

‘Are we going inside?’ I ask, nervously.

Rolant is already pushing through the door.

Inside it is dim and has the solemn smell of lavender. Light filters through two sepia windowpanes and illuminates jars of chutneys and jams, several small milk pails filled with wooden spoons. A large man stands, very still, behind a counter.

I realise suddenly that we are in a shop.

‘Are you here Hamilton?’ Rolant says immediately to him.

The man regards us in turn, first Rolant, then myself, and finally the wilting tomato plants. His glasses, thick as jam jars, magnify his gaze as it remains fixated on the plants. He maintains the expression of one who has directly wandered, shell-shocked, from the wreckage of an explosion.

‘What’s the time Hamilton?’ Rolant remarks, almost conversationally.

The man does not respond, just looks on dazed, in his white vest shirt. A single brace crosses at the shoulder, securing both sides of a pair of rubber fishing trousers just beneath his waist.

‘These tomatoes need repotting,’ I try, taking them from Rolant and setting them on the counter. ‘Are pots something you sell here?’

‘Have you got any pots Hamilton?’ Rolant says quickly. ‘What about earth? Have you got any *earth*, Hamilton?’

Hamilton stares intently at the sorry plants, as though they might be the customer and we are the vegetables. I sense a separate exchange occurring. Perhaps Rolant senses it too because he gives the man a few moments’ silence.

I try to overlook Hamilton’s mysterious clothing and expression, fighting the impulse to stare.

‘Are you very busy Hamilton?’ Rolant asks eventually. ‘Too busy to help us Hamilton?’

No response.

‘Shall we go into the café then Hamilton?’

I watch Hamilton watch the plants. I can feel myself gradually flushing, increasingly hot in the heat of his silence. I shift from one foot to the other, turn my head, searching for something, anything to appear occupied. A cork curtain sways idly to my left, barring the way to elsewhere. I follow its leisurely movements.

Hamilton coughs. Suddenly, as though it were a firing pistol, Rolant snatches the tomato plants from the counter and marches towards the corks. I hurry after him, worrying how to end the exchange, something between kowtowing and waving.

But when I glance back, I see Hamilton has used the distraction to propel himself into a new position: standing with his back to us. Stiff, he looks as though attempting camouflage, another jar on the shelf. His silence appears pressurised too now, as if he has learnt how to compress his whole self shut in such situations.

I sense our actions have somehow ignored the order of things. And I find myself suddenly bold, wandering to his shelf, picking up some amber coloured jam.

‘This looks very nice,’ I try. ‘Two pounds fifty?’

I find the correct change in my coat pocket and place the coins, one by one, on the counter. Rolant watches intently from the curtain. He has positioned himself so that he is now only half inside the room, a wig of Rastafarian corks draping his head and shoulders.

‘Do you have any pots Hamilton?’ he tries again, hopefully.

‘I think we’ll come back later,’ I mutter, joining him at the exit.

Taking a final glance back, Hamilton still stands with his back to the counter. In the corner, a till drawer sits slightly ajar. The coins have vanished. Though still positioned as before, at his sides his hands are dancing excitedly as though some extraordinary current of electricity has brought them back to life.

Beyond the curtain, we follow a narrow hallway into another room. We abruptly come upon an elderly woman there, sitting with her broad back very square against a slender café chair. Hunched over something on the table in front of her, she doesn't look up as we enter, engrossed in a telephone call.

'But it is in front of me and I tell you the dates are not here! How can we go forwards if you don't—,' she puts the phone to her other ear and her voice becomes agitated, '*pass these messages along clearly!* I need copies of the original, and the working out, by tomorrow night. What? No, that's no good to me. Time is running out... *Well, you just get down there then and check—*'

Rolant makes for her private corner, shuffling vigorously to her side. He attempts to sidle around her a few different ways, struggling to get a good view of the paper in front of her. A large tight bun of grey hair poses an additional obstacle. He arches his neck, bending like an encroaching lampshade over one shoulder.

'Three across, *sun*. Eight down, *bungalow*. Six down, *travel*. Five across—'

'Thank you!' the woman snaps, briskly turning the page over. 'I know what the crossword answers are. *No, one of them is here so I have to go. Just don't keep me waiting or I'll just handle it myself!*' She ends the call pointedly, contracting the aerial and forcing the bricklike phone into the pocket of her shooting jacket.

'Mrs Craddock—'

'Miss, *Miss*—for the love of God—it's *Miss!*'

'Do you have any earth?'

'No Rolant, I—'

'What about pots? Do you have any pots Mrs Craddock?'

'What do *you* want with pots?'

She suddenly spies me, loitering awkwardly by the swaying curtain, holding jam. Her pale eyes fall on the wilted tomatoes, dumped on the table next to me.

'Hello,' she says, looking me up and down. 'How long have you been there?' She turns to Rolant. 'We don't just park guests in a corner while we speak to others. That's a *rude* thing to do.'

Rolant glances obligingly in my direction, as if the reprimand was intended for me. 'Do you want to leave Mrs Craddock? So we can sit here?' he continues. 'Are you busy? Too busy to finish your puzzle?'

'I hadn't decided,' she replies witheringly and rolls the crossword up, tucking it into her jacket.

'Are you as busy as Hamilton today? Is Hamilton busier than you because he isn't sitting down? Could you sell things instead of Hamilton, Mrs Craddock? Could you sell earth and pots today? And tea? *Instead* of Hamilton, today?'

She blinks then jerks her head to one side. 'So what is your friend's name?'

Rolant immediately looks out of the window, as though the answer will be appearing there at any moment.

'Rolant, I shall make tea for you and your friend to take with you to the woodshop. You can use your words to help find out her name.'

She gets up briskly from the chair and steps towards me, hand proffered. 'Craddock. And you must be the village newbie. Heard about you. Locals do let a new face in, every decade or so. Staying long?'

'I—'

‘No, I imagine you’re not. Won’t find much around here to keep you. Unless you like trees. Plenty of those.’ Her mouth tapers into a suspicious frown, the surrounding skin loose and puckering. ‘Anyway, I’ll put two teas through the hatch. Leave your plants and jam with me and Rolant will show you around, won’t you Rolant? Ours is a very inclusive community so bear in mind we have some *characters* about the place. But if you start with walking to Coety, you’ll see most of them being useful. Plenty of souvenirs come out of our woodshop,’ she eyes the jam, ‘if you’re in a generous mood.’

‘Is she going to buy a spoon?’ Rolant says hopefully.

‘I don’t control what your friend buys Rolant,’ she says dryly.

‘What do you control?’ asks Rolant.

Her jaw seems to square. She disappears into the kitchenette and Rolant swoops down into her chair.

\*

In our first Welsh house, the honourable teacher became emperor. He stalked the halls of his pebbledash palace, streaks of shaving foam lining his jowls. Someone moved his toothbrush, someone used his towel; there was always something to rage about.

Mama acted the cowering advisor. Her head bowed in supplication: ‘Sorry, sorry, sorry!’ her silk robe creasing as she sank to the ground. ‘Forgive me and my foolish, idle children.’

We left China for a derelict ex-mining town, nestled in a bleak crater. Every morning, a dull fog descended and hung around mines which were closed for at least three tired generations. The same restless crowd gathered outside the post office shop each day, holding babies and Giro cheques. When the doors opened, they would reassemble into a long slouching line, stretching down the street and past our front door. Slowly they would file past the living room window, then past again, weighted down with a combination of scratch cards, tabloids and crisps.

The honourable teacher got a position at the local school, a destitute place windswept and atop a grey hill. The other children were slow and simple, with large foreheads and spread eyes. Most had sickly pale skin and hair the colour of ash, staggering up the unforgiving hill with their hand-me-down crutches and black eyes. Such a place breeds many would-be emperors and our lessons were commanded by the biggest and cruellest. Teachers would try to mediate, only to soon emit a hopeless sigh: ‘*What about a crossword?*’

Only one lesson ever ended differently.

The lead bully was mouthing crossword letters for some time, brow furrowed, as though his brain were squinting. Tired of waiting for everyone else, I started doodling on the back of my crossword. The fierce body of a red dragon loomed across my page, breathing hot destruction on some pebble-dash houses below. I also drew squat people, with ashy hair, fleeing and was just considering adding flames to the back of one of them when the fantasy was violently snatched.

‘Whussat?’ drawls the voice of the bully.

I do not look at him. Instead I grip the pencil tightly in my hand, aware it may never get to finish its work.

‘This you?’ he wants to know.

A ridiculous question.

‘What ISSIT!?’

The whole class listens for my response. I glance at the teacher but she is still behind her desk, sitting back with her eyes closed.



‘Tell me or it’s a *Chinese Burn!*’ He laughs coldly at his own joke, the rest of the class joining in, most nervously. ‘Don’t care if your moanin’ old da’ finds out neither!’

‘He’s not my father.’

‘I know!’ he barks, turning wilder for the correction. ‘Where are *his* ching-chong slanty eyes?’

The children laugh again, though uneasily. I flush, partly from shame but largely with anger. I do not want their eyes: sunken and spread, dull and vacant like soiled old sheep.

‘So who’d yer Mam ‘av it off with then? Was ‘e a ching-chong slanty eyes too, eh!’

Nobody laughs. Suddenly the only sound is the girl next to me, chewing gum vigorously.

‘Hm?’ he demands, producing his sharp finger like a blade. He plunges it repeatedly into the flesh of my arm: ‘Where-is-your-ching-chong-slanty-eyes-father?’

‘Have you finished your crossword?’ comes the teacher’s voice, timidly.

She might as well be a sparrow, pecking at his colossal feet.

He jabs harder, determined to have his prize. ‘Bet ‘e took one look at you and ‘e—,’ my picture is crumpled in front of me, ‘and ‘e dropped down dead!’

The grubby hand containing the paper ball pulls itself back, ready to strike. I clench my eyes shut. ‘*Dead!*’ the little emperor jeers.

I can see the veined crimson of my eyelids. I hear my ears popping with a kind of wild electricity. I sense the ball in his hand, the impending hit, imagining the creased dragon inside its tight paper prison. The red jagged face is bruised with fold lines, smeared with the sweat of his palms, imprisoned by the barbs of his sharp fingers.

*Let me out.*

There is a humming sound, like the dirge of bees in their hive.

*Let me out.*

The pencil in my hand twitches, shakes.

Then the paper ball has escaped his grasp, the dragon its chamber. The shuddering dirge now deafens as distant cries sound like arrows through its smoke. The spin and surge of a struggle, then hands either side lifting me up, heart thundering, an escape like wings, with my talons still locked in prey.

‘Let him go! Let him go! Let him go!’

I obey. But space is still spinning. The windows are deepening, withdrawing their light. Everything blurs and bleeds. The teacher has me by the shoulders, separating me, telling me to leave. And I obey.

As I run home through the streets, past the post office queue, the people stare, their mouths agog. I push between two trollish men, to reach my front door, and one drops his cigarette, swearing loudly.

‘Oi! Look what you done now chinky! That was my last one, you little sh—’

I slam the door in his sweaty face.

A teacher in China once taught me the story of a Buddhist monk, Mu Lain, who went into hell to earn penance for the wicked deeds of his evil mother. Very young, I did not fully understand the meaning of this story, not until that day I was sent home from the Welsh school, in a uniform of blood. When my mother saw me and said only: ‘What will they think of me?’

\*

Tea in hand, Rolant leads the way through the shadowy forest. He stops now and then to pick at a piece of fallen branch, or bend the wiry arm of a sapling. Above us a single magpie watches, rocking and cawing on its black branch. At its feathered back, the leaves form an easy green jigsaw of leaves and dappled grey beams.

‘Birch trees make the best spoons, don’t they?’ Rolant remarks. ‘What would *you* use for a spoon? Would you use birch?’

I look around, eyeing brambles and various nettles, imagining them forced into some kind of ugly woven creation.

‘Would you use sycamore?’ he tries.

‘I think so.’

Rolant nods and walks on, picking and examining as he goes. We follow the winding path, sidestepping rabbit holes and the silvery routes of snails.

Before long, I think I start to hear another step. It is lighter but clumsier than our own. Just above the quaver of the wood-pigeon, there is undeniably a snap of errant twigs. The fat pheasant again?

As we go deeper into the forest, the clamour of birds picks up: a twitter from the ferns; something trills then rustles through the dockweed; a tiny flash of wings dart, tweeting into a treetop. Again some footfall sounds out of turn. I glance back but see only the slender reach of branches, the leaf strewn path. But my neck bristles with the stir of a somebody, something, shadowing us.

We soon reach a stream and Rolant begins tiptoeing his way across the stones. The water trickles and turns, a helicopter seed spinning its way slowly through the current.

Again, another step sounds, louder this time.

‘Rolant?’ I hiss, ‘I think there is something following us!’

No sooner do I speak, but I think I catch a glimpse of them. Between two trees something small, possibly human, darts. Gnome-like in stature, it peeps out, checking our position.

‘I think it’s a child,’ I say. ‘What are they doing?’

I look at Rolant and watch his foot slip from its stepping stone. He stands, suddenly pale, mouth hanging open, his shoe undoubtedly filling with water.

‘A child?’

‘Behind that tree, up there!’ I point beyond the bank but see the creature darting away, as if my finger were an arrow. ‘Look, there it goes! I think it’s *a girl*!’ I watch as a flow of chestnut hair flashes between branches.

‘A girl...’ Rolant breathes.

Something cool dashes my nose, soft as a teardrop. Another lightly splashes my arm. The faint strikes of rain begin to patter the leaves above.

‘Hello?’ I call through the trees.

No answer.

‘Probably a child from the village,’ I shrug and start to walk on. Rolant does not follow.

‘Where is she?’ Rolant whispers slowly, ‘Where is she?’

‘She’s just behind that tree,’ I say, pointing again. ‘Whoever she is, she’s not as good at hiding as she thinks.’

‘Where is she? Where is she?’ Rolant says again.

He has not removed his foot from the stream. When I take his arm, it is trembling.

‘It’s just a girl playing games,’ I tell him, concerned that he is letting both feet get wet now. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Where is she? *Where is she Rolant?*’

His eyes are fixed and faraway, vast depths that echo and lead to somewhere else. He is quite still, only cheeks alert and quivering like an animal, ready to scream or bite. Ready to strike or flee. Suddenly I too am afraid of the thing in the forest.

‘We should go now,’ I tell him, pulling the rigid arm. ‘Rolant?’

‘Where is she Rolant? *Just tell us where she is...*’ he murmurs.

‘Tell *who*?’

The icy stream swells at our sides. Raindrops patter and plop into the pools between rocks, ripples spreading like nets around our feet.

‘*Tell them and you can go home*, just tell them where she is,’ he says softly.

‘Come out, whoever you are!’ I call out. ‘You are scaring him!’

The thing behind the tree slowly crouches down, doesn’t reveal itself.

The cardboard cup in his hand falls, bobbing and sailing downstream in a flurry of rain. My fringe begins to cling, wet and cold against my forehead. Why won’t he move? I think to go into the woods and pull out the trickster but part of me worries he will fall, stiff as a board, into the stream. What will I tell Craddock if he is found bobbing downstream with his cup?

‘Come out now,’ I say suddenly, ‘or I’ll—or I’m coming in!’

The watcher stirs.

‘*Just tell them where she is, just tell them where she is, just tell them where she is, just tell them where she is, just—*,’ Rolant is saying, shaking.

‘Come out!’ I shout, my cry resounding. Several birds take flight, branches shaking and swaying with their departure. A dread stillness follows.

The watcher slowly returns to full height and begins to step towards us, parting the foliage.

I find myself clinging to the unyielding Rolant, locked to his arm, as though ready to climb it or wield it as a weapon if needed. Why is he so afraid? Isn’t it just some trickster, a child taking their fun too far?

But before I can climb or wield, he has wrenched himself free.

‘*I don’t know! I don’t know! I don’t know!*’ he screams, incensed, his voice igniting through the rods of rain.

The girl steps forwards, revealing a small wet face with flushed cheeks. She is laughing and laughing like his terror is the funniest thing, a low and frank sound that rumbles behind his shrieking.

‘You’re not her!’ he wails, at last, ‘*you’re not her!*’

And he runs from the stream, rabbit like, the furry flaps of his hat waving behind him.

I am left facing the eerie miniature girl, rain soaking us both. Seeing her closely now, all fear fades. She is very gnome-like, squat and with a simple, curious face. Dressed in muddy dungarees, her thickset body seems at home among the stout tree trunks. With straggly brown hair and big grazed elbows, she appears overall misshapen and scabby, and not unlike a knotted stump.

‘What are you doing?’ I demand, steadily taking in her unusual looks.

‘H-hid-ing!’ she spits, struggling with some impediment.

‘Well, you scared him! It was *not* funny.’

‘Isn’t! Wrong. N-no. Not m-me!’

‘It was!’ I persist, though inwardly beginning to pity her. A memory stirs regarding Gethin’s barn, someone hiding there. ‘You’ve been following us and now you’ve scared him away,’ I say, looking around but finding no sign of him. I hope he has run somewhere safe, wherever that may be for him.

‘N-Not me w-w-what scared ‘im!’ the girl insists savagely.

‘Then who?’ I say incredulously.

‘L-L-ost g-girl! Rol-ant scared of the l-lost gir-l!’

I shudder, and not just from the cold. ‘Lost girl?’ Addfwyn mentioned something like that. *His parents lost one...* ‘His sister?’

‘N-Not supposed to say.’ She shakes her head stubbornly. ‘But Faelan,’ she says, sticking out her large chin and pointing to her lopsided chest, ‘didn’t scare R-R-Rolant. Gh-osts scaring ‘im. F-following ‘im! See?’ she gestures wildly around us.

The shower seems to get heavier, permeating my coat. ‘Can you take me to Coety woodshop, Faelan?’

Her thick brow becomes furrowed in thinking. Her tongue lolls and traces her lower lip. She regards me darkly, glancing at the swollen stream as though she would like to push me in, let it carry me away. Then her gaze falls on the cardboard cup in my hand. It rapidly becomes a coveting stare.

‘You can have it if you take me there.’

She considers the cup. ‘F-fine. But only *you*,’ she says at last, pointing at my chest, as though there might have been other choices.

Snatching the cup, she pushes gruffly past me and then climbs the opposite bank, almost on all fours.

Together we hurry through the downpour, her stocky profile leading the way. At one point, I think I see another figure, a form lurking behind the carcass of some huge felled tree just ahead.

‘*Rolant?*’ I call, squinting through the deluge.

No answer.

Faelan has not waited for me, steadily becoming a loping character on the horizon; I have to run to catch her up.

When we reach the giant tree carcass, there is no one. The colossal roots are splayed all at angles, channelling tributaries of water through cracks and fissures in the rotten bark. Below, decayed acorns and mud have formed thick black mulch. Near the edge it appears squashed, almost into an undersized track.

‘I thought I saw someone here,’ I tell Faelan.

‘Wh-who?’

I listen closely but can only hear the hollow drumming of rainfall on ancient branches, the music of the nothingness.

‘Gh-ghosts,’ she shrugs, leading on.

And thunder rumbles like a dragon’s throat, swallowing our sinking steps.

\*

The Year of the Ox was to be the last of the emperor’s reign. His final war was to erupt in an unlikely place: among the common chips and pasties of South Wales. Mama, Ri and I trailed after him in a heavy rain to the local chip shop.

The buzzer sounds as we enter, hailing our arrival as the lone patrons. The honourable teacher lodges his umbrella in the stand; we watch him, dripping. He approaches the high counter, placing his elbows on it, studying the laminated menu for us.

Mama ushers us into a row and we huddle on the sallow tiled seating. I recall the sensation of grease smearing us as we wait, sitting with our backs on a wall of steamed glass, the sound of oil bubbling in its dropped cage.

Ri has returned from Tianjin to spend Chinese New Year with us. And yet I know he would rather be there, picking at the delicate wrinkles of a Goubuli, than eating unrefined food with us. He has been away for a year; the distance is more than miles. Having escaped to study cuisine, he now confidently speaks on topics like the science behind Jiaozi, the best way to roll the pale dough, the best way to pour the

soy-vinegar. He likes his mantou deep-fried using a particular method, dipped in an exact condensed milk. But because of us, a grey kebab stick, like a decomposing elephant's leg, now revolves slowly before his disaffected gaze. It's a far cry from Nanshi Food Street but we are the obedient students to the honourable teacher.

I try to pretend it's just the three of us, together to start the New Year, that the honourable teacher is a phantom, an imagined thing that only once haunted a terrible dream. Somewhere in a distant memory this is true. I can remember, I can hide in another place, a different New Year.

We are sitting in a small teashop. It is crowded, patrons squeezing between the backs of our chairs as they press to their own table. A much younger Ri's tiny lips are at the edge of a ceramic bowl, guzzling streams of white noodles. Mama is smiling, chopsticks at her painted mouth, a clutch of white rice ready to be devoured. My fingers are turning a small cup of soy, round and round, trying to read the characters imprinted on it. If I look up, there is a laughing man in glasses sitting opposite me. His face is big and kind and to look into it is to arrive home after being lost for the longest time. Behind him the world is vast and busy, a deluge of arms and voices shouting, making and delivering orders. At his back rotate the fresh glistening bodies of the yellow cooked ducks, the skewered red ribs, the bristled flesh of a heavy chicken, and the spiralling vapours from an unseen pot.

I close my eyes and try to wish us back to this beloved year but, when I open them, Ri's kebab is being hastily embalmed in grey paper. The honourable teacher slides the money, leisurely like a bribe, along the counter. Then suddenly Ri stands.

'I am not hungry.'

'What?'

'I told you in the car, I am not hungry. Nothing has changed. I won't eat *that*.' He points an incriminating finger at the parcel.

The man behind the counter pauses, paper poised between his stubby fingers.

'I have paid so you *will* eat it, ungrateful boy.'

'I can pay for my own food.'

Ri removes a wallet from his pressed trouser leg. There is something uncomfortable about his orderly suit being present here; he is overdressed. Or is it simply the way he is holding himself now? He looks like a man who would never eat kebabs, nor anything he doesn't want to, a man who sees clearly, in glasses not unlike Baba's.

'You *will* eat it.'

Ri returns the wallet to his pocket, steps to the side of the counter, his flat palm suddenly striking it: 'No!'

The chip man flinches. Sweat glistening on his shaved head, he seems unsure whether to interfere. He has been paid, after all.

'Look boy—'

'I am *not* boy any longer!' Ri roars, his significant accent suddenly spitting like flames through the shop. 'You *not* tell me what to do!'

There is a considerable pause. I can hear Mama breathing, low and laboured. This is what she has been dreading.

The man behind the counter looks from Ri to the honourable teacher, then back again. I watch the oil slowly saturating the paper in his hands.

'You *won't*,' the honourable teacher corrects slowly, 'you meant to say you *won't*.'

Ri's face twists, red and savage, his teeth suddenly bared. The man in the suit is suddenly formidable, as if some careful ironing and shoulder pads have added a few extra feet and a few extra fangs to his person.

‘You are not my master!’ he explodes. ‘You are not *their* master!’ He abruptly points to us and Mama recoils. ‘You not tell me what to do, or say, or EAT!’

With the final word, his hand shoots out like a firecracker, collides with the evil spirit—the unfinished kebab parcel—striking it from the unsuspecting grasp of the chip man. We all watch it sail through the greasy air, loudly detonating against the opposite tiled wall in a shower of meat and limp salad. Its fatty contents ricochet, spraying hot shame and cold recrimination against the counter, the walls, *us*. The chip man stands with his mouth agog, weighing righteous anger against possible reprisals.

Mama gets hastily to her feet. She has lettuce, hanging like a dangle charm on her left shoulder.

‘How *dare* you!’ the honourable teacher gasps. He takes hold of Ri by his lapels, gripping him as though he does not know whether to strike him or arrest him. ‘*How dare you.*’

I look at the ugly hands seizing my brother, holding him their prisoner. They appear so familiar there. Years of the emperor’s reign are hissing in my ears, I see his nails ominously penetrating the fine material of the jacket. I think I hear something else, another voice, a white noise whispering within. But Ri’s voice answers first.

‘I dare!’ Ri snaps, prising the hands from him. ‘Let go, old *laowai*!’ he snarls.

‘Listen fellers, if you’re going to—’ But no one is listening to the chip man.

The teacher has taken a swing, clumsy but purposeful, swiping the air close to Ri’s contorted face.

‘No!’ Mama cries, rushing into the fray of arms.

The emperor’s hand comes down, singing through the air like a blade, *crack* sings the honourable blow. A strike and a terrible intake of breath. The chip man bellows like a beaten cow and rushes around his counter. But the damage is done.

The teacher staggers back, slipping slightly on the tattered meat. The large chip man has a glistening hand to his chest, sparring him away, suddenly referee to the struggle.

Ri is holding Mama, the auspicious red soaking them both. She holds the blessing of a bloodied nose; the prosperity of a new year, one without the attacker, suddenly dawning like a promise of good fortune in her eyes.

I would sleep on my red envelope ‘from Mama’ for a week that year, as is the Chinese custom for luck. When I opened it, I found the even number added up to exactly enough money to move out. Mama would be going back to China, the land: ‘To whom my bones belong and spirit is sighing.’

But where did *I* belong? My body only felt heavy, as though full of great stones.

Ri returned to his restaurant, where Zengrui waited to show him a new recipe for Shiba Jie Mahua. It completed an acclaimed new menu which would make them partners only a few weeks later. Mama flew to Tianjin too, where she meant to find another Java sparrow for company, or else another husband. The honourable teacher went eastward into England to find new work.

Three suitcases were packed and parted Wales with the lightness of feathers in the migrating sun. Three shadows seemed to pass across the face of a statue, left staring, with one last red jewel pressed in its hand.

*Happy New Year, my honourable family.*

\*

Craddock is pacing outside the woodshop when Faelan and I arrive. I hear the strict step of her high rider boots just before the trees clear to reveal her, stepping back and forth, in the final drizzles of rain.

‘There you are!’ She marches up to us, face flushed and shining: ‘Coety called me and said Rolant lost our visitor in the forest. He should know he’s to stick to the road!’ Agitated, her grey eyes dart between us, settling on Faelan. ‘And that goes for you too.’

A slow breeze strokes the tree tops, combing and bending them with a low groan, as though stirring in memory.

‘Isn’t! Wrong. N-no. H-he didn’t l-loose us,’ Faelan says. ‘R-Rolant never gets l-lost.’

‘Is that so? Then tell me what did happen.’

Faelan only looks dully behind us, picks her scalp, examines the debris.

‘Rolant thought he saw something, someone...’ I begin.

Casting an eye back, the trenches of our footsteps seem to echo a backwards call—*come back, come back*—only leaves rasping, branches in the wind.

I sense Craddock’s sharp eye hunt the forest, then me, and then the forest again. ‘Did he now?’ she murmurs.

The sudden bark of a fox startles us all.

Craddock stumbles back, bristling. She inhales loudly, glancing at Faelan, clearly anticipating some greater trouble. ‘Right! Inside then.’

We hasten towards the woodshop, Faelan hop-scotching between molehills. Shivering in my damp clothes, the silence is uneasy, nothing of the soft, natural quiet of before; forcibly shushed instead, like voices in a strict library. And I begin to wonder how I will get home without Rolant.

A railed steel ramp leads to the woodshop door, a large wooden plaque, reading ‘Coety’, drips above. As we reach it, another sound comes, shrill and high this time, like an eerie chime, trilling air. It ascends into a ghostly howl.

Something watches from the trees, the heavy pressure of a gaze on our backs. As I glance behind, I catch a darting shadow, black and jagged. I recall the old folklore, the kind Baba used to tell, of foxes outliving their natural years to become shape-shifter spirits, *húli jīng*, stalking the weak and slowly drinking up their lives...

‘I think I see the fox—over there—in the trees.’

Faelan immediately stops and I knock into her. ‘It isn’t a f-fox!’ she says, indifferent to our collision.

I look again, breath caught, scanning and guessing. But whatever was there, squatting in the gloom between trunks, has disappeared. I find only glistening roots and branches.

Faelan hurries on after Craddock who has seemingly doubled her pace to the door. Dazed, I follow, trying to shake myself from childish folklore.

But again comes the fox’s cry, sounding over the faint patter of water through leaves.

‘It does sound like a fox.’

‘Isn’t. Wrong. No!’ Faelan insists. ‘They d-d-on’t sound like that! They s-s-SCREAM.’

‘Scream?’

‘Faelan,’ Craddock says crisply, ‘go inside and tell them I’ve found you both.’

‘Isn’t! Wrong. No. We f-found you. Come o-on!’ Faelan insists and unceremoniously takes my arm and begins using it, rudder-like, to steer me onwards.

‘Ouch. Wh—stop!’

‘Faelan,’ Craddock is repeating, ‘go inside and—’

‘They s-SCREAM when they drink the b-bad medicine and they—’

‘Fae—’

‘Run to the r-river and drink and scream—’

‘Faelan!’

She skips up the ramp, her stumpy arms taking up a leaning stick. She brandishes it crookedly at a nearby sandbag, singing in her toneless little voice: ‘And you’ll n-never hear them in the l-l-light, they only shout g-g-goodnight! GOODNIGHT. And after they get washed up in the r-r-rain—’

‘Faelan go—’

‘She strings r-r-ed daisies in a chain!’

Faelan pierces the sack savagely, spilling its clumpy innards.

‘THAT’S ENOUGH!’ Craddock snatches the stick, Faelan scowling at her as though she took an arm. ‘Go inside and sand something like Hamilton showed you.’ She discards the stick crossly, brandishing a pointed finger in its place. ‘And no more rhyming; Tylwyth Teg rhyme, not little girls. You’ll write in your reflection journal about your negative choice today.’

‘W-why? You r-rip out all the things about y-you,’ Faelan grumbles, pushing through the door and stomping inside.

‘What nonsense,’ Craddock says curtly.

I nod, looking past her at the line of the familiar hills, visible just above the treetops. Perhaps I can use them to navigate a way home? A way *not* through the forest.

‘Too much imagination...’

I nod again.

‘We don’t have any foxes here.’

This seems a rather redundant lie and, even as she says it, it appears to occur to her too. She coughs uncomfortably and pushes the door, rattling its hanging slogan.

‘Latin,’ Craddock says, gesturing at it dismissively. ‘*Suum cuique*; to each his own. Not my preferred motto, but one you’ll need to keep in mind here.’

\*

‘There is no sanding paper for carriage nine.’

‘Here,’ I say, passing some from the communal pile before settling back into my place at the workbench.

‘Thank you, madam.’

The woodshop is filled with the sound of hammering, the barren taste and smell of sawdust. Various strangers mill around with their projects, some talking to themselves, occasionally pausing at the workbench to stare at me. Faelan sits nearby, vigorously sanding down one side of a flute.

Craddock has been gone a long time. I have watched my damp coat, draped like a pelt on the radiator, slowly lighten until completely dry. I attempt to identify another authority. For a time, I suspect a balding man at the opposite workbench, appearing eldest and busiest, from behind. I glance at him, wanting to ask about Rolant, or at least what I should be doing. Then Faelan drops her flute and it rolls under his chair, alarming him. He whips around with chin trembling. Two tiny hands tuck into his chest like a tyrannosaurus, his eyes rolling in untamed directions. His head turns in my direction, perhaps accusingly.

I redden, commit to staring at the nearby shelf of projects. There are some skilfully carved elephants and a stack of varnished jewellery boxes. I study some bookends too, carved into thickset lettering and all notably well-sanded. Addfwyn’s



voice rouses: *Can't convince me they are all twp as a sledge when they can make tidy things like this!*

I sit a little straighter. Guiltily, I manage a smile, look over at the man again. But he has turned to his workbench. I smile aimlessly into the back of his thinning hair.

Faelan gets up abruptly, stamps over to collect her flute. Dropping down on allfours beneath the workbench, she scrabbles around the man's legs who is obliging when commanded to: 'M-move!' She manages to retrieve her flute, along with a fistful of displaced sandpaper, and takes it all to the nearby vice station.

I look on as she winds the vice open, places two pieces of sandpaper inside, and excitedly winds it shut again. One hand tests the paper is sufficiently wedged, pulling hard until there is a tearing sound. She then holds the ripped fragment so close to her eyes, they gradually begin to cross, her turnip-like nose the only thing separating the intensity of a double stare. Her thick tongue slowly curls out, wags across her chin, glistening as she concentrates. The paper gets close enough to scratch her nose and forehead. Then, pleased, she returns to the table.

'Carriage eight is waiting on repairs. More sandpaper please.'

I regard the significant pile of sandpaper, mounting directly at the man's elbow. Several bulges are also visible in his jumper. His narrow eyes slowly travel from my hand, to the communal pile, and then back again.

Sliding another piece to him, I watch as he brazenly hammers it straight into his jumper neck.

'Mr. 7AM c-ollects p-paper,' Faelan says, donating her own pieces to him.

He examines the offering with his long iguana-like fingers before stashing it away with the rest. 'All tickets ready. This train is for Swansea. *Swansea!*' he states, leading a wooden train across the tabletop. 'The confectionery trolley is making its way down the carriages so have correct change ready please.'

His carriages click amiably, bobbing and squeaking into the space beside me. And he regards me for a moment, exhaling slowly before continuing: 'We will be calling at Llandrindod Wells. Best eat that Turkish Delight before the next stop or it'll melt in your pocket. *Llandrindod Wells.*'

He stares at the pocket of my trousers pointedly, exhaling, wincing at the duress of imagined sweets melting there.

'I've finished it, thank you,' I find myself saying.

And the procession of carriages continue, meandering the table edge to Faelan's space: 'And calling at... Llanelli, Llanelli! No smoking on the platform, please. *Llanelli.*' It pulls alongside Faelan's flute: 'The next stop, that this train will arrive at, is Swansea. End of the line! Please take all personal belongings with you. *Swansea.*' The train is slowly guided back to its owner. 'Please mind the gap. All change, thank you.'

'When is it c-coming back t-to Llanelli?' Faelan demands.

'Twenty-four minutes past twelve,' he says immediately, eyes darting back and fore as though stringing an invisible abacus.

'H-h-how much?'

'Have you got a railcard?'

'N-no.'

'Less with a railcard, more without.'

I watch as he pulls the engine very gently forwards and back. Despite the exaggerated size of his hands, they still manage to delicately operate the line of carriages. As he becomes lost in aligning each of them perfectly, I study our long dark shadows, stretching and merging on the table in front of us.

Something in the forest seems to stir again, if only in memory.

‘How’s the sanding coming along?’ Craddock asks, suddenly at my side. ‘Hope everyone has made you feel welcome. You all have, haven’t you?’ Her sharp eye falls on Mr. 7AM’s stuffed jumper. ‘Mr. Seven?’

‘Must remember to take all personal belongings with you...’ he mutters, busy examining the links between his carriages.

‘Indeed. Is that flute finished yet Faelan?’

‘Isn’t! Wrong. N-no. Sandp-paper is broken.’

‘Just stick at it Faelan and you will wear away the rough. Persistence is the key to perfection. Now,’ she says turning to me, ‘there’s someone asking for you.’

‘H-Hamilton?’ Faelan shouts hopefully.

‘Hamilton’s job is to look after the shop today,’ says Craddock, indicating for me to follow to her.

I hurry after her authoritarian pace as it weaves between the workbenches. Through the opposite doorway there is a noisier workroom full of uneven stacked palettes and several stations littered with tools. A tall man with rolled-up sleeves operates a noisy sanding wheel on behalf of another man, stooped and fumbling with his file.

‘This space is more supervised because of the machinery,’ says Craddock. ‘We can produce a lot in a year, most sells well in the seasonal markets. It’s all Welsh wood and properly sourced. And anything not to standard goes nowhere but the furnace; made right or not at all!’

Mysterious cylinders hang overhead and the nearby machine heads whir as they are operated by an industrious assortment of people. A man in a jumper covered with badges follows us for a moment, a cluster of spinning tops clutched to his chest. Another stands motionless, hands glistening with oil, next to the chair he has been working on, transfixed by my presence. However the rest do not even regard us as we pass through. They appear happily captivated by their jobs, hammering and sawing, nailing and sweeping. Timber crates are steadily loaded with handsome stacks of smooth chairs, footstools and varnished tables.

‘Rolant owes you an apology,’ Craddock shouts over a nearby drill. ‘About time he learnt his lesson about going into Crythor Forest. There’s a perfectly good road to Coety. Perhaps now he will use it.’

We turn another cluttered corner of palettes and I suddenly realise we have arrived back at the door with the Latin slogan. This time I notice a peeling red door next to it, a little ajar.

‘He’s in there,’ says Craddock.

We both stare at the door for a moment before I tentatively push it open. A small narrow cupboard space is revealed, lined with pegs and musty coats. In one gloomy corner a familiar deerstalker hat is bowed miserably.

‘I’ll leave you to it then!’ says Craddock briskly, as though addressing someone about to repaint the door, rather than console the person behind it.

I nod and shuffle in, awkwardly, a monstrous duffle coat obscuring my path. ‘Rolant?’ I say, bending the puffy arms aside like branches, ‘it’s me.’

He doesn’t respond.

Clearing my throat, I try again: ‘Miss Craddock said you were in here.’

After a drawn silence: ‘Are you going to be *here* too?’ comes the forlorn voice.

‘Yes, if that’s all right?’

‘Do you like coats?’

‘I think so.’

‘You have a green coat, don’t you? And a scarf you have had for one year?’

‘Yes, you remember Rolant,’ I perch timidly next to him, folds of nylon and polyester enveloping us.

‘I remember things I look at...’ he says quietly. ‘Do you have other things?’

His face still does not rise from obscurity but somehow I know he was crying—crying alone among the coats. The thought is immediately sad and strange; why did I not think he would do something like that before? Cry, exactly like other people, like everyone, like *me*. I instantly wish to be someone who would never have assumed less about Rolant.

I quickly consider which of my humble possessions would interest him, perhaps cause the bowed head to rise. ‘I have hand painted Clay Figure Zhang. Actually, *one*, a gold and red emperor.’

‘One?’ the hat quivers a little, as though catching the scent of something exciting.

‘My brother, Ri, has the empress so they’re not really a Zhang pair... anymore.’

‘Why? Is he very busy? Busy like the man who left the tomatoes?’

‘Ri lives in Tianjin now.’

‘How many people live there?’

‘Millions, I think?’

‘Bigger than Dyffryn Tŷ then? A much bigger farm?’

‘It’s a city.’

‘Like Cardiff?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you been to Cardiff Cathedral? Dad fell over there and he couldn’t get up until Mum held his arm.’

‘Oh,’ I shift uncomfortably. ‘Sorry.’

‘Dad wasn’t hurt though, was he? He just felt heavy inside because of the service for *her*... because we lit a candle? The special candles upset everyone. Is there a cathedral in Tee-Ta-Tei—’

‘Tianjin?’

‘Your brother would fall over too then, wouldn’t he? See the candles and feel heavy? Everyone feels heavy when they see the Cardiff Cathedral candles, don’t they?’

I shake my head, confused and fumbling for the respectful answer. ‘Christmas candles?’

‘Not really,’ he mumbles, his head still low. ‘There aren’t any presents or decorations, only candles with names on. All the names of people who will be very busy, for a very long time. More time than you are supposed to wait in the cloakroom... or keep counting for. *Forever*. What number comes after forever?’

Ri would compulsively count, count for Mama’s return, in the garden of pavilions and strangers. And I imagine the black characters of her name in white wax, how it might feel to watch them melt away into nothing.

My hand reaches out, instinctively, twitching in the electric space between fingertips and Rolant’s shoulder. I think he senses it there, senses my touch, hovering like a low cloud above it.

‘What was the name on the candle?’ I murmur.

‘*Her* name?’

‘Yes.’

‘The candle name?’

‘Yes.’

‘Elen.’

‘*Elen*,’ I repeat carefully. ‘That’s a nice name.’

‘What’s your name?’ he says, lifting eyes shining and deep as vestiges of blue ice, ‘is it a nice name too?’

‘Miao.’

‘M-Miao?’ he tries. ‘Is Elen’s name nicer? And easier to say?’

‘Yes,’ I allow, with a smile. Feeling bolder, I go on: ‘So that’s who you thought you saw, in Crythor Forest?’

‘We didn’t like staying on the road... is that why she will be busy forever?’

‘No, it’s just easy to lose your way.’

‘We didn’t lose our way,’ he says flatly. ‘I never get lost, do I?’

I stare into my lap, trying to still the mounting questions.

‘We didn’t lose our way,’ Rolant repeats firmly. ‘She followed the strange noise. But no one believed me, did they?’

My skin prickles. ‘I think I believe you. There was something in the forest earlier. I thought I heard it, a fox.’

‘Are we not supposed to talk about the foxes?’

‘But Miss Craddock said that there aren’t any.’

‘Is that because she put poison down? To *rid us of the vermin*? That means things you don’t like, doesn’t it? Like cows? Cows stand on farmers’ feet and break them, don’t they? Only they’re not *vermin* because they can be useful too. But foxes are always *vermin*?’

I hesitate but then press on: ‘The one I thought I saw... It seemed different. More like a shadow or—’

‘A ghost?’ Rolant whispers suddenly.

‘I don’t think so.’ I try to recall what exactly I did see but feel something run through me. I try to shrug it off but Rolant is watching me closely. ‘Why?’

‘Elen saw it too but I,’ his voice drops to a hush, ‘*I don’t like ghosts*.’ He looks away. ‘So I hid in here... until the policeman said I must come out. He said I was *saying stories* and *should tell the truth*. But I always tell the truth, don’t I? Because lying is pretending, not real?’

I imagine how it must have been when they eventually found him: Craddock bristling and barking her questions; the unforgiving, browless stare of a policeman scrutinising each response. Later would come the *well-heeled* mother, the *all tidy clothes* father, both with their *noses in the fire*, the family who *have not a bit to do with him*...

‘I believe you Rolant,’ I tell him earnestly.

We sit in silence for the longest time. Somewhere beyond the dark and the mustiness of the coats there is activity, the heavy sounds of diligent industry. The reverberation of wood and metals thunk and clang, buzz and boom as they are separated and strike the hard floor. But we sit still, so still I think we will become clay statues. Somewhere there is the faint murmur of machines, the odd drone of a voice and another droning its reply. These distant voices don’t seem to speak words, muffled and distorted as though passing through layers of cotton wool; I cannot dissect one syllable from the next. I consider that we have been forgotten in our little dark place. And I feel myself merging with the fabric’s gloomy folds, becoming no more than a pair of eyes, two winking jewels that look out from an impassive wall, somewhere deep and dim beyond the bustle of things that live and move and make me do the same.

‘So you’ll come with me into the forest again?’ Rolant says suddenly.

‘Hm?’ I blink, roused from the reverie.

‘If I promise not to run away again, will you come with me to Dragon’s Teeth Cave?’

‘A cave,’ I repeat, uneasily. ‘Why do you want to go there?’

‘You believe me, don’t you Miao?’

I meet his blue unwavering gaze. Craddock’s sharp voice still echoes about staying to the road. But the words steadily become one of the cotton wool drones, another low murmuring, gradually being replaced in my mind with an image: her face when she first heard the fox’s cry.

\*

Rhosyn is downstairs when I return. Her propped feet are just visible through the living room door. Both are clumsily bandaged with toilet paper, toes poking above, chipped nail polish glinting in the light of the television. The cottage is otherwise gloomy. All the curtains have been drawn so that the only natural light comes from the broken blind in the kitchen where I struggle to wedge the re-potted tomatoes atop the narrow sill.

It was a long walk home across the fields, despite following the road. My thoughts remained unsettled, continuously circling Crythor Forest like its chattering rooks. Around and around, recalling the same doubts: Craddock’s face when the fox first cried out; her face when she lied about it later; the sounds of the fox again; her face; her *lie*. Round these thoughts went, until I couldn’t trust what was real. Only Rolant remained clear now, his hushed voice among the coats... *Dragons Teeth Cave*.

Could it be a real place? Somehow I knew not to ask Craddock about it.

Yet, looking at the tomato plants, I wonder if I am being unfair. Craddock was good enough to see that someone re-pot them, even pinching out every little green bud from the crooks of their arms herself.

‘These,’ she said as she ripped off a little bud and held it close to her eye, ‘mean your plants are putting their time into growing *out*, not growing *up*! Your plants want to be wild bushes while you try your hardest to make clean, sturdy plants of them.’

At this point she paused to look out from where we assembled to leave Coety. Faelan was outside, riding another worker’s mobility scooter in circles as the owner slumped against the wall, shouting incoherent commands.

‘They want freedom to do what they merry-well please but—,’ she sighed, plucking another bud, ‘if you don’t intervene, soon and often, you’ll have nothing but chaos. That means fewer tomatoes but better ones, and then what’s the whole point, hm? *Fruits of your labours!*’

Regarding them now, the honourable teacher’s plants look strange in great, newly-composted containers. They sit exactly in the centre of each pot and are almost unrecognisable from their once erratic shapes. The thin pre-roots, which before hung at their sides like limp shirataki noodles, are now veiled in earth. All the crisp, darker leaves have been plucked away. The chaos is gone. And part of me is sorry for it. Baba always said that growing things naturally was good energy. At least their simple smell is the same, a soft earthy fragrance of rain in gardens... *the forest*.

I shake my head, determined not to think about it anymore, and go into the living room. Rhosyn is still stretched out there in her nightgown, the radio crackling at her side.

‘Are you watching something?’ I ask, sinking into the armchair across from hers.

The television is muted and she stares blankly into it, mumbles: ‘News.’

Smoke rises from the cigarette in her blackened fingertips. Her other hand is resting on a plate, covered in a sallow sauce.

‘Have you eaten?’

‘Thought it was picking to rain when you left so didn’ fancy walking the shop.’ She takes a heavy drag on the cigarette, exhales. ‘Looked in fridge an’ all the good was gone. Bit thick expectin’ me to make my dinner from naught!’ She lifts a piece of wet bread from the plate, lets it split and slop back down. ‘Was Pencraig turkey, and chicken thighs, and duck—two o’ those and likely there’s another one to be—*all* frozen. Not a soul here to take a thing out ready! So just an eyeful of toast and some jar sauce for me, *ach-a-fi*.’

‘Sorry, I went to Dyffryn Tŷ with Rolant.’

‘Well, good!’ she snarls suddenly. ‘That’s right where he needs to stay! Don’t know how many more times I need to tell them that half-soaked types can’t be trespassin’ round here. But I can give any the length of my tongue and it won’t stop ‘em doing as they like! *Entitled*, that’s what they are. Nowadays you get born with so much as a dent in your head, or fidgetty pains in your legs, and the world don’t half make it up to you.’ She points her cigarette at me, the thinly plucked brows contracting. ‘Don’t you try and tell me that lot don’t have it too easy! I knew a twp girl growing up in this village... Dilys, she was called. Expect you’ve already heard what happened to her?’

‘N—’

‘Ha! Won’t fool me! I know that lot at The Red Dragon won’t have missed canting about dear, sweet, soft old Dilys. God never gave her a farm full of helpers...’ The cigarette turns slowly in her bony fingers. ‘Just a drunken layabout father. Said it was ‘im what did it to her. And rotted in a cell for it, he did. Never told where she was... but everyone’s money was on the slurry tank.’ She reclines, closing her eyes and drawing on the cigarette, and a leisurely smoke blows through her nose. ‘That’s life in the real world, my girl. The twp don’t last in it. So I won’t take a crowd of ‘em coming here now! Craddock can just keep her pests all away...’ Perhaps she suspects my silence because she suddenly regards me sharply. ‘So what *have* you heard in The Red Dragon then? Fancy they told you I’m barred. Can’t say I’m all cut up about it!’ She lets out a hollow laugh which ends in a hacking cough. ‘As long as they pay you on time,’ she eventually adds, ‘for your rent.’ She regards me again, eyes narrowing. ‘Just don’t you go saying stories about what goes on around here. Because mark my words girl: they’ll turn on you too soon enough. Especially with a face like yours! You from away and all, they’ll use that against you, *see if they don’t*. They’ll always see anyone not born right here as a bit of a flag. You’ll never be before even one o’ them, remember that much. Oh, they are liars beyond—’

She continues as I turn to the television. Two insipid-looking presenters mouth a story. They soon vanish, replaced as the scene switches to devastation: winds shredding trees and houses, roofs peeling like cans; cars stacked on kerbs, crushed under felled power lines; endless shots of drenched people staggering in plastic ponchos, pelted with rain and sand. A river swells with the splintered bones of stripped homes, a town separated and stirred together like soup. Deserted children squat in sodden clothes, crying. People shouting and falling as they hold hands in a chain, a string of paper dolls waist deep in surging water. One of them suddenly stumbles, is swept down and out of sight.

I look away. The white noise of the radio prickles and pops in my ears. Rhosyn pauses a rant about overpriced drinks to look at the television too.

‘Well that’s what you get,’ she says and takes a protracted drag on her cigarette. ‘It’s all according to where you live nowadays. Give me Wales, before there, any old time. Building huts up volcanoes then surprised they come off it black as the ace o’ spades? All those places away are alike: food too strong, souvenirs all coggy-handed tack, and all day sweating then all night choppin’ sticks to stay warm. Now

that's no way to carry on! Speaking of carrying on, was another message for you on the machine,' she says, idly tapping ash onto the plate. 'Just hear his voice and of course I know he is belonging to you.'

'Ri?'

'The very article.'

'What did he say?' I say rapidly.

'Oh, the usual niceties about his swanky restaurant,' she rolls her eyes and I feel myself flush. 'Oh, and he and your mam been rowin' and now she's gone.'

'Gone?' I repeat. 'Where? What else did he—'

'Now hold your horses!' Rhosyn says, dragging and then exhaling a large cloud of smoke in my direction. 'If he ever called on your *own* phone, I wouldn't have to play secretary like! All that money but he can't buy you one of those mobile telephones? Did you ever think of that?'

'Sorry,' I say truthfully. 'But I think he calls the landline b—'

'Because 'e is cheap!' she smiles triumphantly and stubs the cigarette out on the plate. 'Any road, you won't be calling him back off *my* phone. Got the bill through this week see?' And she pulls an envelope from the side of the chair and hurls it at me. '*Not cheap at all, I CAN PROMISE YOU!*'

Back in my room, I sit on the bed and stare at Ri's postcards. Faced with Rhosyn's fury and my slow income, all I can do is write more cards. At least those words will remain just between Ri and I.

And I sit for a while, thinking what I will tell him next about my small life here. But there is little to say, compared to the excitement of Tianjin. My postcard will typically become all questions about *his* life, escaping into it and out of my own. I will ask questions about Mama too and perhaps they will have made peace by the time he replies. Or he will just write back a few lines about his latest adventure and overlook any trouble; as though it were a thing he neglected to pack in his suitcase when he left here.

Soon my eyes grow heavy. I try to recall the last news I sent... likely the focus was the weather, my work at the pub. Should I tell him about Dyffryn Tŷ? I consider how I could describe Rolant, worrying I will risk his disapproval or even his jumping to brotherly conclusions. After all, Ri's friends are all stylish businessmen like his partner Zengrui.

I soon resign myself to sleep instead. Ri does not need to hear about my small life tonight. Instead, I make a decision: I will go to the cave with Rolant. And in my next postcard, my own life may appear a little larger.

\*

'Are you coming?'

Ahead there is a black, almond-shaped opening. Rolant approaches it first, a new bobble hat drooping on his head. His lean silhouette pauses in the crag between light and dark.

'What's in there?' I ask, second guessing my decision already.

'Are you coming?' Rolant repeats—the question he has been asking all morning.

It's icy in Crythor Forest. The trees above us are teeming with rooks, squabbling, rushing in and out of the leaves. We've just interrupted their fighting over acorns on the forest floor and now a few rest on the lower branches, regarding me with their sideways stare.

'All right...' I say, drawing my scarf up around my chin. 'All right, I'm coming.'

Inside it is immediately cool and dark, enclosed in rock. There is an almost metallic smell, not unlike brass instruments in the valley school's music classes.

Rolant's dim torchlight stretches feebly down the grey, corrugated throat of the cave. I follow, a strange pressure in my chest. Darkness is altered somehow, grainy, fuzzy at its edges. Light from the opening soon vanishes and a grave darkness settles. I stay closely behind Rolant, despite his quick pace.

'How far now?' I whisper, afraid to raise my voice and disturb the deep silence beyond our echoing footsteps.

'Far,' he murmurs.

I walk a little closer to him, so close his backpack is grazing my front.

The ceiling begins to lower, curving steeply downwards. I stoop a little, pressing a hand to the chill wall. Between my fingers, the rock is dimly veined with pale, spidery fissures and I try to concentrate on those, rather than the haunting black stretch now at our backs, reaching down in front of us.

The floor begins to become uneven, jagged in places. Soon my hand is holding the strap on Rolant's backpack, gripping it, terrified that I'll stumble and he won't notice.

'Are you stepping?' he asks. 'Slide your feet, like *this*.'

I trust he has demonstrated but it is too dark to see.

As we go on, I become aware of the adjacent wall, steadily growing closer until its coarse, bulging swells are snagging my coat. Closer and closer it comes, each potholed step bringing the walls in nearer around us.

Then Rolant turns, the light abruptly changing angles so I am plunged into almost immediate darkness. My hand is jolted free of his backpack.

'Rolant?' I cry, my voice echoing. I grope around and find his shoulder. 'Rolant?'

'Can you walk sideways? Like a crab?' he wants to know, oblivious to my terror.

'Sideways?' I grip his shoulder tightly. 'Wait, I can't see!'

But he is slipping away and my hand is soon grasping at icy stone, as if he has simply passed through it like a veil. I feel around, squinting until I can just make out a vanishing pinprick of light. I hear a scraping sound ahead, something dragging itself against the walls. I take a tentative step and find myself wedged tight. I turn with difficulty. *Like a crab*. Sidestepping, I find myself making slow progress, getting somewhere, blindly.

'Rolant?' I hiss, the rock so close it traps my nose.

No answer.

Irregular lumps press into my legs and chest, making the passage impassable without force. The floor rises and falls, slopes and swells, and soon I become aware of the ceiling doing the same, dropping to touch my head.

I think I begin to hear the ancient water, dripping and trickling, hollowing out this pathway. And the ground begins to slope downwards, my feet slipping in places. The walls continue to press in, in places so closely that I think I will have to turn back. During one struggle, I stop to listen and I am certain I can hear water now. But there is still nothing of Rolant.

The ceiling steadily drops, along with the floor. My hands push flat against the wall in front and, by stretching out one, I can just about drag myself through. *How deep are we now?* I begin picturing caves which stretch all the way into oblivion, passageways you could walk in for months without ever resurfacing.

'Rolant?'



I stumble but regain footing. The floor has changed, grainy like sand, shifting beneath my shoes. Something wet and icy strikes my cheek. It dribbles down but my hands are trapped too tightly at my sides to wipe it away.

The sound of water is getting louder, white noise, increasingly echoing through the cave. I think of Rhosyn at home with the radio. Will she come looking for me if I never return? I struggle on, determined to catch up with Rolant.

The walls soon resist less and less, easing from me as though the cave is slowly yawning open. There is light again, dim and flickering, somewhere ahead and in the direction of now roaring water.

‘Rolant?’

‘Why did you rest in there?’ I hear his voice call from somewhere. ‘You’re not meant to rest in there!’

‘Sorry,’ I reply, relief tempering my irritation.

‘Stop!’ his voice suddenly commands, his cry echoing all around us.

‘W-what is it?’

Disoriented by echoes, I search the emptiness, still uncertain where he is. Then suddenly the full beam of his torch bursts through the dark. I recoil but feel my arm being taken sharply. Refocusing, I find Rolant’s bobble hat immediately before my eyes.

‘Look!’ he hisses at me and the torch’s light is thrust downwards into the gaping maw of a bottomless hole.

‘I could have...’

‘I waited for you so you didn’t die.’

‘Thank you,’ I manage.

‘We need to walk this way now,’ he says, pulling me.

‘Rolant, wait.’ I stop. ‘I don’t think we should go any further.’

Rolant turns, blinding me a second time.

‘Listen,’ I insist, rubbing the dancing stars from my eyes, ‘this is too dangerous. I think we should just—’

‘Can you hear the waterfall?’

‘I think we need to go back.’

‘Do you want to see the waterfall?’

I sigh. Though blinded by the torch’s beam, I know his face is set with the kind of confidence that comes with a lot of exploring dangerous places alone. ‘The waterfall,’ I say, ‘but then we should go back.’

The light finally swivels away and he leads on, seemingly at a more considerate pace. I begin to wonder how he knows his way around so well. But even as I open my mouth to ask, he abruptly stops.

‘Do you like crystal pools?’ he says, shining the torch downwards.

I find a glittering white stretch at our feet, a blanket of winking crystals. Like a layer of luminous snow, it spreads gradually to thicker stretches of ice, fracturing in places to reveal the stark black rock beneath.

‘Do you like it?’

‘It’s beautiful.’

‘Do you want to see the waterfall? Will you think the waterfall is more beautiful?’

He takes hold of my arm again and pulls me in the direction of the crashing water. The torchlight is directed upwards to reveal a fissure gushing a powerful jet of spray. Rolant puts out his hand, letting the water play through his fingers.

‘Just water,’ he says as though I thought it might be something more complicated, ‘like when you have a shower. Do you have showers or baths?’

‘Showers,’ I say, putting out my hand to feel the tingle of icy droplets.

‘I have baths. Hamilton has showers. He tripped over in the shower. Did he tell you?’

I recall our silent encounter in his shop and wonder if he ever ‘tells’ anyone anything directly. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘There was purple on his side and he got to drive in an ambulance. Everyone saw him living in a hospital bed and Faelan ate the angry woman’s grapes. Do you like grapes?’

‘Yes.’

We stand for a time at the waterfall, catching droplets, before Rolant sits us down on a stone ridge, giving me the torch so as to remove his ‘picnic’ from the backpack: fudge, mustard and a tin of beans.

‘Have you met the beans man in Dolau?’ Rolant asks, carefully counting four pieces of fudge from the striped paper bag and handing them to me. I hold the torch on his hands as he does this, hoping he will notice how not to direct it at someone’s eyes.

I shake my head and put the fudge into my mouth, finding it is unpleasantly hard.

‘The man in Dolau whose house got stolen? Mr. 7AM says he eats beans on the Dolau platform because his house got stolen.’ Rolant opens the jar of mustard and dips a piece of fudge inside. ‘His new house *was* the bench by the clock but then the Station Action Group said it wasn’t allowed to be a house.’ He chews the mustard covered piece, apparently enjoying the combination. ‘Mr. 7AM said it wouldn’t be *regulation* for a train station bench to be a house. Can that man live at Dyffryn Tŷ?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say truthfully.

Rolant hastily puts all the remaining fudge in his mouth at once, his cheeks bulging, and hands me the tin of beans.

I hold it for a time, tracing our surroundings with the torch, wondering which ‘action group’ plays emperor over this vacant land. Supposing we were now under one of Gethin’s cow fields, would Gethin own the right to *square things*, as with a Dyffryn Tŷ resident, found unexplained in his barn? I imagine Gethin stamping wildly above us: *I know you are in there, I seen you coming out!*

‘Are you going to eat those?’

I regard the unopened tin in my hands. ‘No, I don’t think so. You?’

‘Beans look like insect eggs,’ he states, climbing to his feet and taking the torch.

‘Wait!’ I say, hastily stuffing the tin back in his bag as he tries to hike away. ‘Where are we going?’

‘That way,’ and he points the beam ahead, lighting the mouth of a small opening, not unlike the one I almost fell through. ‘Do you want to see Ben?’

‘Ben?’ I hasten after him. ‘Who is Ben?’

‘He lives in the playroom.’

I stop short as Rolant bends to climb down. ‘Ben is a *person*?’

‘Not really,’ Rolant says, lowering himself down.

I watch as the light follows him into the depths of the hole. ‘Wait!’

Using my feet, I find the lip of the hole, sinking to feel the rock is wet and slippery. I attempt to lower my legs but there is no floor, only space to lodge myself between the two sides and slowly shuffle down. Heart racing, I listen for Rolant and hear him moving around below.

‘Are you resting?’ his voice suddenly calls up.

‘No!’ I call back, my voice echoing. ‘Rolant, is this safe? H-how far down is it?’ I swallow. ‘How will we get back up?’

‘You have to come down first,’ he says, unhelpfully.

‘I don’t think I can. It’s too far.’

There is a long silence, in which I listen in the dark to the rushing of water and my own laboured breathing. The air is dull and heavy and I don’t seem to be able to get enough of it now. But I don’t dare call out again, in case he does not reply and I discover he has gone.

‘Elen,’ the voice comes at last, ‘was smaller than you and she didn’t trip over and get purple on her side, did she? I’ll hold the light. If you can see, you won’t get purple on your side, will you? You won’t trip over?’

‘No,’ I reply desperately, ‘light will be very, very good—helpful. Light please!’

The electric beam immediately ricochets up through the hole, dazzling me and causing me to lose balance. There is an unpleasant scraping and banging, light and dark alternating and spinning, as I feel myself falling.

I pinball between walls. I scream, and keep screaming.

Below, I think I hear Rolant commanding me to ‘stop that’ and my body oddly attempts to obey him, wildly thrusting out my limbs, where they are bludgeoned and grazed. My fall is slowed, then halted. I feel myself wedged between the walls. But I continue to scream. The scream continues long after I have lost breath, echoing horribly through the caverns and passageways like the fabled Baigujing, white bone spirit, tunnelling down into the earth.

‘Miao?’

My name sounds dulled, strange. I manage to slow my breathing, thinking of Baba, picturing him doing three sharp inhales and the low exhale through the mouth, *the mouth with the half smile*. I hold onto his image. My hands are shaking but become firm on the cold rock surrounding me.

The light of the torch strikes against my closed eyelids, red and veined.

‘Miao? Are you coming down, Miao?’

‘N-no. I don’t think so.’

‘Did you trip over? Is there purple on your side?’

‘No, Rolant. I—,’ my voice trembles and sticks in my throat. ‘I just can’t move. You might have to get, get help!’

‘Is your side purple? Do you need to drive in an ambulance?’

‘No!’ I cry, trying to think how I can make him understand. ‘I’m too afraid... I’m too afraid Rolant.’

Tears begin prickling, hot behind my eyelids, the light on them so intense he must be directly focusing it from somewhere below.

‘Are you afraid I’ll see you crying? I go in the cloakroom when I want to cry. Hamilton cried when his side—’

‘It’s not because I’m crying! It’s because I’m stuck!’ I retort, suddenly nettled. ‘And my hands are hurt. You didn’t listen to me when I said we should go back! Nobody listens to me!’ I grip the rock hard, digging in my nails. ‘I shouldn’t be down here,’ I say, ‘I never do things like this!’

My outburst is met with a respectful silence. I sniff a few times, trying to summon the courage to move. But I find my body has locked itself firmly in place.

‘Miao?’ Rolant says eventually, ‘are your... hands purple?’

My mouth quivers. ‘They might be Rolant. I don’t know.’

There is an increasing ache in my arms and legs where they have been keeping me suspended. ‘I think I just—Rolant I need help getting out!’ I call down to him finally.

‘I’m not down there,’ he says, his voice so close to mine I flinch. ‘Why do you keep shouting like I’m down *there*?’

‘Ro—?’ I open my eyes slowly, immediately dazzled again with light and then slowly, I mark the silhouette of his face peering at me under my left arm.

‘Are you still tripping over?’ Rolant wants to know. ‘When will you stop tripping over?’

Looking down, I discover the floor directly beneath. Shamefacedly, I drop down and stagger almost upright, finding the ceiling uncomfortably low.

‘I didn’t know I fell so far,’ I say, rubbing my stinging eyes.

‘Will you do it again? Or will you be careful next time?’

‘Careful,’ I say, just relieved to be alive. ‘Rolant, *where* are we going? I don’t think I can climb back up that way.’

‘Do you want to see Ben, or not?’ he says, the bobble on his hat flopping enquiringly to one side.

‘Who is Ben?’

Rolant takes my arm and pulls me awkwardly along the stooping passage. The way is rippled and glistening, another almond-shaped tunnel of lumpy, brown rocks. We struggle along it. The air becomes even thicker, stale and close. Several tunnels lead from ours. The light is repeatedly shone down one blackened throat and then disregarded as we follow the bleak channel of its twin.

Heart quickening, I realise how similar all these tunnels appear, how easily I could mistake one for another. I am suddenly glad Rolant has me confidently by the arm. Down some of the openings I think I hear water, or the rush of wind, or even footsteps—echoes of our own?

Rolant continues to hurry us on and I notice the walls becoming drier, grey and pocked as a pumice stone. We stop only once to regard a shape on them. Rolant shines the torch close to it and stands, almost reverently, staring for some time. I know not to say anything as we regard the tiny handprint, dark and delicate in the rock, looking as though one heavy breath could dust it away.

Our pace then quickens; we are darting down tunnels like snakes after rats, chasing back the darkness, as the ceiling gets lower and lower. Soon we are almost crouching, my hand suddenly in Rolant’s as he guides us through. It occurs to me, with embarrassment, that in different circumstances, this could be a very different gesture.

Rolant abruptly stops.

‘Can you crawl through here?’

I try to squint past him to inspect what ‘here’ will mean and see only a thin, dark fissure in the rock with stones cascading out.

‘We won’t fit,’ I say simply.

‘Watch me,’ he replies, then pauses to add: ‘don’t trip over.’

He releases my hand and presses the torch into it. Then, stooping much lower, he begins removing his backpack. He drops awkwardly to the ground. Shuffling on his stomach, he parts the stones, pushing the bag ahead of him. He soon begins to disappear into the rock as though being steadily swallowed. I watch him kick and twist, guiding the light closer, until I am shining it on nothing more than his glossy green wellingtons.

It is then that I hear something behind me. I turn, hold my breath and listen but can only make out the sound of Rolant’s ongoing struggle. An echo? A *bat*? My heart races, suddenly realising there is a solid wall of rock between me and my guide.

‘Rolant?’ I hiss, but his wellingtons have disappeared.

Breathing quickly I drop down, as he did, rolling the torch out in front of me. I elbow forwards, the cool stones pressing my cheeks as I twist my head to fit. Again I think I hear something behind me, sharp and fast like the flap of wings, or footsteps, or... I push myself through further. What lives in caves? Bats, snakes, *Ben*?

‘Rolant?’ I manage with difficulty, and I think I hear him reply somewhere much further on.

I pull ahead, not wanting to be left with whatever I sensed at our backs.

Time seems to slow as I pull myself along, groping ahead like a sightless mole, shifting and parting the pieces in my path. I almost forget that there was ever a point, a destination, a place beyond the rock. Now there is only fear and the cold and the pressure of the walls gripping me tight.

Just as I think this tunnel stretches all the way into the centre of the earth, I see a hand groping in front of me.

‘Can you reach?’

I am pulled, and then dragged unceremoniously, through an opening where I lie gasping, face down for a moment, exhausted.

‘Are you crying?’ Rolant says, taking my arm and helping me shakily to my feet.

He waves the torch around wildly, but mostly in my eyes.

‘I’m okay, I think.’ I straighten and steady myself on the nearby wall, it is then I see what Rolant is shining the torch at.

We are in a great open cavern, high-ceilinged and circular, silent and dry. But in the centre of this cavern, are things I can hardly believe. The torch travels slowly over: a little wooden desk littered with dominoes; a framed black and white photograph; a rigid teddybear with a black candlestick phone at his paw; a string of miniature circus carriages, each with a wooden animal rearing inside. Nearby, is a small rocking chair where the eerie faces of several china dolls sit staring in a row. Lastly, the torch moves over the flank of a painted horse, the wild eyes of a donkey, the pink legs of a pig, and other stranger creatures. They are all skewered by metal barley-twist poles, joining them in a circular ornament, a miniature carousel with a crank wheel at its centre.

‘What is all this?’

‘Do you like it?’

Moving towards the carousel, I stare into the illuminated faces of the animals, garish and wide-eyed. The horse’s sapphire stare seems to follow me. I trace the cold veins along its muzzle, the pale pink of the flared nostrils, the chipped paint of its bridle. And touching the soft, damp velvet of its saddle, I feel the impulse to leap on, turn the crank, revolve with laughter, and forget where we are. I remove my hand from the velvet and the sensation vanishes. I follow the carousel around: the squealing pig with its head bent too far back; the gawkily large teeth of the braying donkey; the slender arc of the black and gold unicorn, its wild eye laced with lashes.

Rolant’s torchlight follows me as I turn to the next animal. I falter when I see it: the lean Chinese dragon. Taloned and golden, its saddle is ornamented with tiny red tassels. The body lurches ferociously forwards but—

‘Where is the head?’

‘Has it gone? Did someone get rid of the cow?’ Rolant says, joining me at the carousel.

‘It’s not a cow; it’s a dragon,’ I say pointing at the talons. ‘And someone has broken it.’ Touching the clean serrated edges, I add: ‘Removed the head, somehow. Was it you?’

'I never break things. Do you? And do you buy them first? Faelan dropped a whole bag of birdseed in the shop. Hamilton tried to hide it in his mouth. But the shouting man at the shop saw and said the rule is: *you break it, you buy it!* Faelan likes breaking things, doesn't she? Did she break the dragon?'

'I don't kn—'

'Who else likes breaking things? Do you know anyone who likes breaking things?'

He flashes the torch in my eyes like an interrogator and I bat it away: 'Rolant, what are these things? Why did you bring me here?'

'You like it, don't you?' he says sadly, the hat lowering so that only the bobble is visible in the semidarkness. 'She used to like it.'

'Elen?'

'Yes.'

He seems so disappointed my irritation fades. 'I *do* like it Rolant. I'm glad we came. But what are all these toys doing down here?'

'Do you have a secret place?' he murmurs. His light moves slowly over the carousel animals, rising and falling as though willing them to follow it. 'Do you have a place that no one else talks about?'

The light pauses its motion and I sense his sadness. 'I think I did once. I had a bird, Xiaohong. Whenever I watched him, my life seemed without troubles.'

'A bird?' Rolant cries suddenly, the light manically dancing across the carousel, the toys, the walls. 'Which is your favourite animal?' And he leads me excitedly around the carousel, the light still dancing in his frenzied grasp.

He takes me around faster and faster, until we are running, around and around, the animals all becoming a blur. I begin to fear he will pull us both over in the dark.

I manage to gasp: 'Probably *the dragon!*' We stop abruptly. 'When it had a head,' I add.

'Yes,' Rolant nods, 'when it wasn't broken, it was *her* favourite too. Do you like the horse? Was that your second choice? Was Ben your second choice?'

'So *this* is Ben. He is your favourite?'

He timidly fondles the velvet seat but says nothing.

'Listen Rolant, we must start back now. You can tell me more as we go?'

'Tell you more about what? The animals?'

'Well,' I look around at the murky edges of toys, skulking in the shadows beyond the erratic flashes of light. 'These toys are very old, much older than both of us.'

'But they're *ours*.'

'Yes, but I mean before you and Elen, who—'

'Elen found them,' he says. 'The ghosts showed her. She said I must keep it a secret.' I turn cold as he continues faintly: 'And I did, didn't I? But you see ghosts too. You believed me. I didn't tell. Even when she...'

'Disappeared?'

He nods, slowly stroking the horse's neck, his voice hollow as he murmurs: '*Where is she Rolant? Where is she?* Couldn't tell, mustn't say. You shouldn't break promises, should you?'

'They never, never looked down here?' my heart begins to quicken. I think of the shadow in the woods, white noise, the bottomless holes, the rock layers leading to nowhere, *the noise behind us*.

'It's a secret place.'

‘Rolant, is she—could she be here?’ I glance around frenziedly. I imagine a feral silhouette creeping, lurking beneath the gloom like a pale, unforgiving toad about to jump into the midst of bewildered flies, striking at anything making to escape.

Just then comes the high sound, an echo, resonating from somewhere in the deep passageways—a fox’s cry.

‘Húli jīng!’

‘Elen?’

\*

The final two scenes in Baba’s folding book are almost completely black. Short, sharp scratches crosshatch the dusky sky above a Chinese food district. Below, smudged figures and faces blur with market stands and bicycles. Only two figures are distinct: one small, the other taller and holding a bamboo pole. Two flecks of ink detail the little figure’s braid, just as I wore it, hung across one shoulder, that last evening with Baba.

Usually it would have been Mama and I in the dreary market; she did not trust Baba to barter more than thirty-percent or measure purchases correctly. While most mothers only took their tape measure to the cloth district, hers stretched across every strip of cooked beef, each flaccid brick of tofu, even the rusty cages of chickens as the occupants protested inside. Still, the measurement always read the same: ‘*Tai gui le!*’; too expensive. She insisted on buying nothing until it was almost dark. Pacing like a tiger, she’d patiently stalk the marketplace, lighting each new clove cigarette from the stub of the last, until vendors started to take down the wet poles of their stands. Then she would thrust us through crowds hurrying in the opposite direction, not noticing if I was jostled or trampled. Most sellers would pause wiping down their cleavers so Mama could barter lower and lower, taking advantage of their weariness. Marching home in the dark, her fist full of flesh, and I swinging the sodden head and feet in white plastic, she would laugh triumphantly and call them all fools.

But that last evening, Mama complained of a headache from the pernicious influence of the summer heat, sending me with Baba instead. I remember clinging to his side in excitement as we walked the busy meat stalls first, admiring his quick decisions. When a vendor told him there were cold months ahead, he immediately bought several cuts of dog meat without measuring any. He then pointed at the bodies of three ducks on a wet slab and told me to choose one. Mama never let *me* choose. Leaning on his pole, he looked on amused as I quickly decided on the fattest one.

‘Ah! Xiaopang!’ he nodded, grinning and paying the vendor the requested price.

Elated, I set off running to the next stall, not seeing the farmer on his bicycle in time. A squeal of breaks rang through the market. I recall a flash of the man’s features, dirty and terrified as he swerved, the necks of bunched chickens lolling wildly on the back of his bicycle. Then suddenly Baba was holding me tight and close, his hands shaking, his bamboo pole lying black in the mud.

He must have inked the marketplace into his folding book later that night. Mama roared from her bed for most of it because she thought he overpaid for everything. As was her usual custom, she tore the auspicious knot from the wall above their bed and hurled the red decoration outside. She said it, like their marriage, never brought them ‘double happiness’.

I sat at Xiaohong's cage, covering my ears. Ri read his book in the corner. Baba boiled herbs for Mama's headache. The rest was lost, as if in a great dark smoke, consumed in what happened afterwards.

The next, and last image, in Baba's folding book is of a formidable earth dragon. When they found Baba, the explosion in the mine mixed the ink with ash and singed the teeth. Its face skeletal and leering, the dragon now spits scorch marks and tattered edges, all around it the inked tunnels of an immense underground world—a cave as deep and dark as the one that swallowed Baba.

\*

Rolant pulls me through the endless shadows, tunnels that run in every direction like spreading veins of spilt ink. Echoes layer and quaver as we knock and thud through. Behind us, the fox's screams recoil into the hollow passageways before striking out again, nearer. The torch lights countless openings. Down the mouth of one, I think I glimpse Baba's body, a paper doll, a bleached skeleton, beneath the crush of giant fists of rock. I blink, slowing, but darkness swallows him whole.

Then suddenly a girl's voice at my ear: *run!*

I scream and Rolant stops short, we collide, both falling face down in the passage, the torch striking the wall and spinning away into the shadows ahead.

The last of the echoes fade, leaving a terrible stillness. Our frantic breathing gradually fills the air.

'Rolant? Get up!'

I think I hear him, crying and crushed beneath me. Feeling around, I discover the bobble on his hat and then his hand. 'Are you all right?'

'Something pushed me over; was it you? Was it an accident?'

'Sorry. I heard...' I swallow hard, 'someone here.'

I imagine a pale feral child, slithering snake-like, savage from Rolant's secret keeping, a ghostly Baigujing living on slime and shadows.

'Elen?' says Rolant. 'But Elen isn't allowed to frighten me, is she?'

Something stirs behind us, an eerie sweeping sound.

'Quick!' I hiss, shaking his backpack and finding my footing.

I hasten towards where the torch fell, grappling for its handle and then shining it back to find Rolant.

'Ro—' the light illuminates his body still on the floor and a terrible shape over him.

The silhouette hovers, obscure in the space above him, the passage suddenly alive with static, popping—the empty sound on Rhosyn's radio. The form seems to spread with the sound, descending on Rolant, the prickling and humming growing louder. Features form, two sunken black sockets. Teeth. *The dragon's teeth?*

'Rolant, get up!'

Pitching forwards, I stumble on a loose rock, fall, and then seize it from the ground, hurling it into the haze above him. But it only clouts the wall. I grab his arm and pull hard. He resists until he sees the shape too.

'Stop it Elen!' he says, gripping me. 'Tell her to stop!'

'It's not her!' I shout, wrestling and falling with him into the opposite wall. *'It's not Elen!'*

He stops resisting and our eyes meet in the gloom, both of us shaking, the light flickering between us.

'I need the torch,' he says.



I release it and he directs it next to us, down a narrow opening. We press through the low tunnel like rabbits with a great snake at our backs until we reach a dead end.

‘We’re lost!’

‘I never get lost, do I?’

‘Where now then?’

‘Do you know what a leg-up is?’

His arms abruptly grip both of my legs, forcing me through a dripping cavern above. Recovering, I reach down and help pull him up next to me. Even as we catch our breath, the sound of popping static begins to creep beneath us.

‘It’s following us!’

‘Does it want my hat?’ says Rolant. ‘*Do you want my hat?* J-just take it!’ he casts the hat down before I can stop him.

At once, there is a thunderous blast and a gust of debris erupts from below. We fall back, covering our mouths and coughing.

‘Did I k-kill it?’ he splutters, the dust settling around us.

‘I don’t think—’

A rumbling rises. The ground groans and trembles. I sway but resist falling as the torch illuminates a deep chasm, cracking like ice, between our feet.

We run the length of the low passage, still coughing, every gesture made vivid by broken torchlight. Our shapes become erratic, cavorting on the walls like leather shadow puppets, limbs projecting as though on sticks, illuminated by ancient flickering oil lamps. Leaping, our shadow forms travel as over endless stretches of mulberry paper. As the cracking subsides, this frantic shadow-play seems to slow and sway. Tired feet strike the solid floor like two wooden beaters pounding the tough hide of the dagu. Time bends with the dance of our path. The light from the torch grows soft and dull around the edges. Eventually the distant sound of water reaches us and, for the first time, I dare to hope we will escape.

Another white, welcome stream of light soon appears, purer than the sallow yellow of any torch. Piercing the cave wall ahead, it slices open the dark in a jagged shape. Struggling through it, we shield our eyes from the wonderful brightness outside.

The immediate cawing of rooks berates us as we climb out, gasping, on grazed hands and knees. Pale, grey light filters through the branches above, telling morning has passed into late afternoon and rain.

Loosening my scarf and looking back, I discover we have emerged from a deep crag beneath the wet, gnarled roots of an ancient tree. I press a hand to my chest, feeling my heartbeat return to its natural rhythm. Rolant, flushed and wide-eyed, watches and mirrors the action.

We sit for a time on the mossy forest floor, listening to the rooks warring in the treetops. I think about Baba... trapped. Whatever Rolant thinks about, he sits easily in my silence.

Around us the bracken fronds are blowing gently, a breath that seems to sigh through everything. A mottled squirrel peers around the base of a tree at us. Thunder grumbles in the distance.

‘I think we should go,’ I say finally.

He nods and feels agitatedly around on his head. ‘My hat,’ he says miserably.

‘It’s gone,’ I tell him.

‘Where?’

Our thoughts unwillingly reach back into the bleak maw of the cave, retrace the passages between its great teeth, and hear the wind playing through them like a lost child.

\*

Rolant's head is bowed, eyes inches from the ruler. He has been pencilling a line for some time, examining it closely, and then erasing it.

'Is this forty-five degrees?'

'I don't know.'

'Is yours?'

'I didn't use a ruler.'

He looks up, examining my work before returning quickly to his own.

It is a cold afternoon at Dyffryn Tŷ, a smattering of rain striking the art workshop window. Vague watercolours decorate the walls and crusty papier-mâché dragons pack the tops of drawers. Bright, sequinned mobiles are strung from the ceiling, turning and winking slowly in the grey light above us.

Though Rolant has said nothing more about the events in the cave, I sense we are both reliving and replaying them in our minds, puppeteering shapes through the semi-darkness of our memories. His company seems the only way to be sure it was all real, sitting paired and yet divided in thought, wondering if I will find the right words to talk to him about it, eventually.

I think of Addfwyn in the humid Red Dragon kitchen, Owen and Gethin banging their cutlery impatiently as she hurries to wait on them. Shame struggles to the surface as I imagine her cursing my absence today. But I know I could not have just accepted the usual morning routine. The night was haunted by endless visions of deep, gloomy places with a voice trapped and crying out, everlasting tunnels that led only into darkness, something stirring, flashes of fire, the teeth of a dragon...

'Welcome!'

A woman drifts in, gliding towards us in a floaty paisley dress, several familiar residents trailing behind. She arrives at the table with a serene expression, pausing to regard Rolant's drawing. But before she can say anything more, Faelan's stocky silhouette ambles out from behind her delicate dress like a forest creature trampling flowers.

'W-why you here?' she demands.

'It's so lovely having a visitor to be creative with in Hafan today,' the woman smiles, impervious to the rude tone. 'And how lovely that you're joining the workshop too Rolant.' She makes a graceful gesture through the air with her hand. 'Welcome to you both!'

'Is this forty-five degrees?' Rolant says without looking up.

'I'm sure it is about that Rolant.'

'About that? *About that?* Is it more than forty-five degrees then?' Rolant confronts her with the ruler, 'or less than forty-five degrees? Is it forty-two? Or more than forty-two? Or less?'

'There will be plenty of time to talk about our work later,' she replies calmly. Then turning to me: 'Introductions first! My name's Dafina and, forgive me, *your* name is?'

'Miao.'

'Oh yes, of course!' She places a hand to her forehead. 'Aderyn *did* tell me. I remember now. Please excuse my forgetfulness. I ate wheat this week,' she gives a composed sigh, 'and you know how that clouds the mind.'

‘Who is Aderyn?’ Rolant wants to know. ‘Does she have clouds in her mind too?’

‘Aderyn is Miss Craddock.’

‘Who is Mrs Craddock then?’

‘Miss Craddock.’

‘Who?’

‘No, Rolant,’ Dafina asserts, though her expression remains sedate, ‘Miss Craddock’s *first name* is Aderyn.’

‘Didn’t she tell you to call her *Mrs* Craddock? Did she tell you it is *rude for god’s sake* to call her anything else?’

‘No, Rolant, she didn’t say that. We use kind words to our friends.’ The composure wavers. ‘Please remember her name is *Miss* Craddock.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Aderyn isn’t married Rolant.’

‘Why not?’

She promptly turns to address the crowd of onlookers. ‘Let’s have everybody sitting down now, shall we?’

Dafina quickly disperses the residents, gesturing down the table and pulling out stools. Faelan stomps forwards, barging into Mr. 7AM.

‘No pushing on the platform!’ he says, clinging to the edge of the table.

‘That’s my s-s-seat!’ she spits, at my side.

‘Sorry,’ I say and get up.

‘Do you always sit there?’ Rolant wants to know. ‘Or do you want it because Miao has it?’ He brandishes the ruler at her accusingly: ‘Are you *jealous*?’

‘D-don’t point!’ she commands, swatting at it.

‘Don’t you like it?’ Rolant says, waving it out of reach. ‘Should you just sit down then?’

‘Give me i-it! Want it now. G-give!’

‘All personal belongings...’ Mr. 7AM mumbles fearfully, his long fingers creeping to his mouth.

‘Who wants paper?’ Dafina offers brightly.

‘Shall I just move?’

‘Yes, move s-stupid girl!’ Faelan says, fists on her hips but eyes still darting after Rolant’s waving ruler.

‘Are you giving out the paper Faelan?’ tries Dafina.

‘Passengers should mind the gap, mind the gap, the gap,’ Mr. 7AM chants warily in the background.

‘I’ll sit the other side,’ I say, manoeuvring around the table.

‘Couldn’t Faelan sit there?’ asks Rolant, waving the ruler at her again, making her scream with rage.

A man with a jumper covered in badges, who I remember from the woodshop, suddenly slides onto the vacated stool.

‘That’s m-my seat M-MARTIN!’ Faelan bellows in his face.

Martin regards her curiously, as if he has only just realised she is there. He then looks around hopelessly, settling his gaze on Rolant’s ruler which is still trembling dangerously, as though preparing to conduct a violent crescendo.

‘Faelan?’ Dafina says in a pleasant voice, ‘have you considered that Martin *didn’t know* you wanted to sit there?’

Faelan doesn’t answer, instead pulling at Martin’s arm; ‘Get UP y-you!’

His expression suddenly changes to terror as he is ejected. He tugs himself free and immediately gestures with his hands, signing something to someone across

the room. It isn't until they stride over, dressed in faded navy dungarees, that I recognise the uniquely thick glasses.

We all watch as Hamilton silently steps between Martin and Faelan, a strange and slow movement, like a large mammal gliding through water.

'Isn't. Wrong. NO!' Faelan explodes, staring angrily up into his bulk. 'I s-sit there! My place. Always mine!'

Hamilton stares, indifferent.

'Do you want her to stop shouting at Martin?' says Rolant. 'He wants you to stop shouting at Martin, don't you Hamilton?'

'N-not shouting!' shouts Faelan.

'Do you want her to sit down Hamilton?' Rolant continues, directing the ruler at Hamilton like a microphone.

'N-not fair Hamilt-ton!' wails Faelan, staring up into his expressionless face.

Another resident, an older man clutching a withered doll, drifts closer, watching intently.

'Hamilton thinks you should sit down,' Rolant concludes.

'Bicycles and smoking are not to be permitted!' Mr. 7AM chips in.

'I-isn't. Wrong,' Faelan says, voice cracking, 'n-no Hamilton!'

Hamilton just stares, his morose eyes magnified by their immense lenses.

'Hamilton will only count to three,' Rolant says sternly, the ruler striking out in her direction, 'ONE!'

The man at my side grips the doll by the throat.

'N-no Hamilton!' Faelan pleads with his blank gaze.

Mr. 7AM backs away, mumbling about ticket dodgers.

'TWO!'

Dafina steps closer, mildly places a hand on Hamilton's arm.

'W-w-wait!' Faelan suddenly gasps, escaping to another stool.

'Three!' Rolant says, smacking the ruler dramatically down.

Everyone remains still.

'Mr. Seven,' says Dafina to break the uncomfortable silence, 'will you please hand out the paper?'

I sit down next to Rolant again and find he has already returned to his measuring. Opposite us, Martin lowers himself very slowly onto the stool under Hamilton's supervision. They exchange a look. Martin indicates the drawing I have left in his place. Hamilton takes it up, very carefully, and delivers it to me. He stands for a moment, a large shadow. His eyes remain ahead.

'Thank you.'

He edges away, hands dancing at his sides.

'Forty-five degrees,' Rolant mutters. 'Is this forty-five degrees?' he brandishes the drawing at Mr. 7AM as he also settles opposite us, along with all the paper he has collected but not distributed.

'Are you old enough to ride in this carriage alone?' Mr. 7AM replies. 'Who's your escort? Mummy got the tickets, hm? Unaccompanied. Oh dear me.' He frowns, pushing a piece of paper towards Rolant, whispering: 'well, here's a ticket for you. I won't tell them you got on at Llanelli.'

'It is forty-five then?' says Rolant.

'And twenty pence change,' Mr. 7AM nods.

Rolant considers his work and then begins erasing it once more.

'Well, aren't you making a pig's ear of that?' suddenly hisses a strange voice behind us.

I stare fixedly into my own drawing, feeling my face redden, unsure who the remark was meant for. Rolant remains busy.

*'I SAID: aren't you making a pig's ear of that!'*

Turning, two lidded blue eyes meet mine; a cold, dour stare. A rosy mouth remains motionless beneath an upturned porcelain nose.

*'Uh...'*

The glossy brow tilts forwards. *'Just going to stare at me, are you? Well I shan't hope for the courtesy of an introduction then.'* The doll shakes abruptly and turns away, revealing a large bow at the back of its yellowing lace dress.

*'Why are you ignoring Kizette?'* Rolant asks, pencilling another angle.

I shake my head. *'Sorry.'*

*'Well,'* the simpering voice retorts as the doll whips around to face us again, *'shall I give you a sporting chance? I suppose it is possible you are not as entirely hopeless as you look.'*

*'Walter,'* Dafina calls over from where she is busy putting paint into pallets, *'Kizette is being unkind to our visitor.'*

Walter's fingers tighten around the doll's legs.

*'There you go again, getting us into trouble,'* Kizette hisses in my direction. *'Haven't you already caused enough of that? Like your nose in other people's business, don't you? Quite the little busy-body, wandering about where—'*

*'Walter, tell Kizette she will have to go to bed if she makes unfriendly choices.'*

The doll tosses her brassy blonde curls and sighs. *'Oh, very well. Let us be civil then dears. Introductions first: I am Miss Kizette, lady of leisure.'*

*'What does a lady of leisure do?'* interrupts Rolant, holding his latest line work out hopefully.

Kizette examines it only briefly. *'It is what I don't do, that counts.'*

*'My name's Miao,'* I offer.

*'And what is it that you do?'*

I feel myself flushing again, finding nothing of significance to contribute.

*'Fascinating, I'm sure!'*

*'You like wearing green coats, don't you?'* Rolant states authoritatively. *'And catching Taichis in your garden?'*

*'Catching what did you say?'* There is a petulant snort. *'How terribly common. No wonder your friend looks so unkempt; just when did that hair last see a brush? Perhaps she should just live in the garden and be done with it!'*

*'Kizette!'* She is raised to Walter's face. *'Behave or they'll send you to bed!'* he hisses.

Kizette makes a show of looking him up and down in his faded cap and dated cloth suit. *'Oh, don't be tiresome Walter!'* she tells him without Walter's lips appearing to move.

He glances furtively around. His forehead glistens with sweat. *'We're not supposed to make any trouble. Let's just sit down.'*

*'Agreed. Not here though. I don't care to be stared at you see...'* the small head turns pointedly in my direction.

*'Over by the window?'*

*'It will do.'*

Walter catches my eye for a moment, flashes me a vague smile. He then hurries over to a seat by the window. Kizette is positioned on the sill so that she is facing out into the drizzling rain, a dark silhouette at the pane.

*'Now remember our pieces today are for Michaelmas, our upcoming festival of courage,'* Dafina is saying to everyone. *'This year it will be an extra special day, as it*

coincides with the eclipse. We all finished our pinhole viewers last session,' she waves a hand at a pile of neatly decorated boxes in the corner. 'Of course Saint Michael will remain our true focus. We all know who Saint Michael is, don't we?'

'My uncle is called M-Michael,' says Faelan.

'Is Saint Michael Faelan's uncle?' Rolant says, doubtfully.

'No,' Dafina says patiently, 'no he isn't.' She crosses to one of the nearby drawers and retrieves a collection of pictures. 'He is an archangel, isn't he? Michaelmas is our chance to celebrate a Christian hero, the famous guardian of good,' she declares as she shares the pictures along the table, 'the dragon-slayer!'

I study the nearest image, an etching of Saint Michael, wings arcing, thrusting his spear into a seven-headed monster. Beneath the monochrome tangle of their bodies lies an oddly tranquil landscape with hills and a small village in the distance, a church with a tall spire.

'At the end of the world, the war between good and evil is led by the Archangel Michael. And who do you think wins?'

'The d-dragon!' Faelan said immediately.

A few residents mumble in agreement.

'Look again,' encourages Dafina.

'Does the dragon not win?' says Rolant, disappointed. 'Even though it has more heads? And Uncle Michael only has one?'

'*Saint Michael!*' Kizette hisses from the window.

'He only has one head though, doesn't he? Are you sure he wins?'

Dafina smiles and returns to the drawer. She flicks through a large folder until she finds what she is looking for. 'Here: *Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon, who was defeated.*' She looks up brightly. 'See? Michael beats the dragon.'

'What if he came back later?' says Rolant.

'He didn't Rolant.'

'Where did he go then?'

Dafina's expression tightens. 'Well he...' she scans down the page. 'Listen: *And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil, the deceiver of the whole world... he was thrown down.*'

'Down where?'

'Down—,' she consults her page again. '*Down to the earth.*'

'So he's down here now?'

The residents become alarmed, some glancing fearfully at the windows as though one of the great heads may appear there at any moment.

'No Rolant, we don't need to worry about that.'

'But didn't you say—'

'Okay then,' Dafina says loudly, clapping her hands. 'Time to create some Michaelmas art!'

I obediently begin a new drawing, of Michael and the dragon. But even as I glance at the etching for inspiration, I can't help considering the tiny village below and how much it looks like our own. The shadow in the cave rears in my mind. *That ancient serpent, who is called the devil...*

Rolant begins asking about angles again and I shake the foolishness from my head. Around us, the residents move and sit and then move again; they shift like a tide, rhythmically washing in and out, dragging the debris of their artwork into, and then directly out of, various work spaces so that after an hour, only Rolant and I have remained anchored in our original places.

'All right everyone,' Dafina calls out eventually. 'Let's gallery our creations!'

The work is arranged, with varying degrees of reverence, along the table and everyone begins to walk in a slow procession around it. Certain residents point or mumble approval while others look in the opposite direction, become immediately distracted by paint on their hands or counting badges on their jumper.

‘Definitely some wonderful pieces for the festival table here,’ says Dafina.

There are a few common themes: angels, clouds, dragons. And then a painting containing what appears to be their shop. Hamilton hovers next to it, hands dancing. As I reach the end of the display, I stop short and Mr. 7AM almost knocks into me.

‘Rolant!’ I hiss, getting his attention.

‘It’s forty-five degrees, isn’t it?’ he says proudly, thinking I mean his.

‘Not that one,’ I persist, trying to remain discrete, ‘*look!*’

The final piece on the table is a painting of a slender dragon, yellow with a splash of red across its back. The body is dissected by a subtle line, I lean in.

‘Is it a Michaelmas dragon?’ says Rolant, disinterested.

‘Look *closer*,’ I tell him and watch as his eyes grow wide.

‘Elen’s dragon? With its head not broken off?’

‘*Sh!*’

Everyone else remains preoccupied with continuing the procession around the table. I urge Rolant onwards too, trying not to attract attention.

‘You know what this means?’ I say, glancing around to make sure we are not overheard.

‘Uncle Michael broke Elen’s dragon?’

‘What? No!’ I glance around again. ‘Rolant, it’s somebody *here*.’

Later, when the residents drift up to collect their work, I watch closely. Faelan immediately snatches up a piece with no discernible shapes. Mr. 7AM collects an impressive pencil sketch of a train, which appears to be driven by a dragon as an afterthought. Hamilton slides the shop painting towards himself and then a circular angel, potentially a badge design, towards Martin. I wait patiently while others loiter around or become preoccupied with discussing upcoming festival preparations. The dragon painting remains on the table for some time under my gaze, Rolant talking about his angle incessantly in the background.

‘Miao, isn’t this yours?’ Dafina says, startling me into collecting my own work. ‘It’s very good!’

Revisiting my drawing with fresh eyes, it becomes obvious that I focused too much on the dragon. Michael is too small. He disappears into the top corner like a retreating butterfly. Irritated, I return with it to my place.

Suddenly I remember I am supposed to be watching the other dragon picture. I look over, only to find it has vanished.

‘Rolant!’ I say, quickly looking at the residents filtering from the room. ‘Did you see who took it?’

‘Took it? Took what? The man at the village shop says we’re not allowed to take things anymore or *we can all bloody well shop somewhere else*. Can we still take things from Hamilton’s shop? And from here?’

‘That painting of the dragon; who took it?’

‘Mr. 7AM took the model parts out of a magazine because he couldn’t see which ones were inside. But if he already got that collector carriage, he shouldn’t *have to* buy the magazine, should he?’

‘Did Mr. 7AM take the painting?’

‘What painting?’

‘The painting of the dragon,’ I lower my voice, ‘*the dragon from the cave*.’

Rolant bites his lip. ‘Shall we go to the village shop?’

'Why? Is that where he is going?'  
 'Is he?'  
 I regard Rolant closely. 'I don't think we're talking about the same thing.'  
 'Why not?' he asks. 'Were you not doing good listening?'  
 I resignedly watch the last of the residents disappear through the doors,  
 Dafina giving us a friendly wave before she disappears after them.  
 I sigh. 'Now we'll never find out who else knows about it.'  
 'About what?' Rolant says, examining his angle again.  
 'The cave carousel.'  
 'Sh!'  
 'Everyone has gone so we can—'  
 'Shhh!'  
 'But—'  
 'SHHH!' the angle is waved agitatedly in my face.  
 I sit back. 'What? *Why?*' I hiss, feeling foolish lowering my voice in an empty room.  
 He jerks his head in the direction of the window. I look over, expecting to see someone spying in, but there is nothing but a dull rain dribbling down. Seeing my empty expression, he continues to gesture with his head, his deerstalker hat flapping wildly at his cheeks.  
 'I can't see anything.'  
 'Shall we go to the shop Miao?' he asks loudly. 'Shall we see if Mr. 7AM is taking model parts again?'  
 This time, I follow his gaze and realise its focus. Positioned at the window, there is still one small figure, sitting and looking out.  
 'Kizette?' I mouth to him.  
 He shakes his head furiously and motions for us to leave.  
 I breathe out heavily through my nose, much the same way Baba would when he counted Mama's empty bottles of baijiu in the kitchen. 'Yes Rolant,' I say loudly, 'we should go all the way to the village shop, in the rain.'  
 He nods in a knowing manner and starts for the door.  
 '*Oh don't bother with my invitation then!*' comes the bitter little voice from the window. '*Just leave me unchaperoned in a strange place, why don't you?*'  
 Kizette still sits motionless at the pane.  
 'Would you like to come with us?' Rolant says innocently, 'or would you rather not be in the way?'  
 I feel my heart race, watching Rolant address the back of her tousled hair.  
 '*Oh, well isn't that a fine offer for a lady's consideration? Expire slowly from loneliness or rot quickly in ill company; it will be forever said that I was spoilt for choices on this day.*'  
 'Does that mean no?' says Rolant.  
 '*It means you are an insolent brute in need of a whipping!*'  
 Suddenly I am aware of a presence at the door.  
 'There you are,' Walter says, crossing the room to collect Kizette.  
 '*Well it's about time!*' she says coldly from the crook of his arm. '*Honestly, leaving me here with this riffraff looking up my skirt.*'  
 'We didn't do that, did we Miao?' insists Rolant.  
 I slowly shake my head, uneasiness snapping like sticks in my stomach. How could he have thrown his voice like that, right across the room?  
 '*Liars and brigands!*'  
 'Come now, Kizette, it's time for checkers,' Walter says hurriedly.



*'Not before whipping time!'*

'We're all very sorry Kizette,' he says and fusses with her hair, 'there, there.'

I notice a piece of paper poking from his jacket pocket, carefully folded into a triangle like a handkerchief.

'What did you paint today?' I find myself boldly asking.

*'Well, well,'* Kizette's head turns slowly towards me, *'it speaks.'*

'What did you paint today, *Walter?*' I try again.

'I really must get Kizette home,' he replies quickly, not looking at us. 'Been a very poor attendant today haven't I? Letting you keep these knots in your hair.'

*'Oh, you'll brush them out,'* she assures him sourly.

'Did you paint Kizette?' asks Rolant; he has spied the paper in Walter's pocket too.

'Yes,' Walter says lightly, 'yes, that's it.'

He turns to leave but Rolant hurries over: 'Can we see? Miao wants to see. Are you leaving because we want to see?'

*'Stand aside little man!'*

'We really are in something of a h-hurry actually,' Walter says, not getting his own voice quite right. 'Perhaps another time?'

'Is it because you forgot to paint her dress?'

Walter flinches. 'W-what are you saying?'

*'A filthy remark!'*

'Rolant, I—,' but he talks over me.

'Why did you forget her clothes then?'

'I d-didn't forget! I—there is a chiffon—'

'Was she wearing a saddle with tassels on?'

*'Well, really!'* I watch Kizette turn, bristling, and hope Hamilton will somehow appear and sidle between us.

'I would n-never—would be wrong—not someth—'

*'Oh, do keep digging Walter! We almost have a trench to shoot them from.'*

'Why did you paint her yellow?' says Rolant, immediately attracting Kizette's lidded gaze.

*'Indeed?'*

'I really d-don't know what you... Kizette is an experienced fashion model!'

'With a red back? Or did you not look at her properly? My angle,' Rolant presents his work, 'is forty-five degrees because I looked at it properly. Did you measure her—'

*'I never! Walter, defend me against this boy's advances.'*

'He's not listening to me, no one is listening to *me!*' gasps Walter, clutching Kizette with both hands now, 'noth—'

*'—ing will be right until you stop talking to toys and stop wearing silly boyish clothes. When will you grow up Walter? You're not a boy, not anymore.'*

'Stop telling me what to do! I can't stand it—you *can't just*—not when you—I tell you—DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!'

And he suddenly strikes Kizette, once and hard on the edge of the table. There is a cracking sound and her eyes stay shut when she is whipped back upwards, clutched outwards on his chest like a talisman.

*'Time—time—f-for checkers NOW!'*

'Are you shouting because you are late?' asks Rolant.

'R-Rolant—,' Walter begins.

*'And Rolant's little friend!'* leers Kizette, her eyes still shut.

‘Rolant and Rolant’s little... *Rolant’s friend*,’ Walter struggles, ‘we really must take our leave now.’

‘But you haven’t shown us the painting yet, have you?’

‘*And we’re not going to!*’ snaps Kizette. ‘*Mind your own business, idiot boy!*’

Walter glances wildly, from Rolant to me and then back again. Then he hurries past, shoes squeaking. Flushed, he attempts to push through the door, struggles. Kizette hangs limply by one arm at his side. He realises to pull the door, does so, and rushes through.

‘Show it to us later then?’ Rolant calls after them. ‘Will they?’ he at once asks me.

‘I don’t think...’ I shake my head, still dazed by the outburst. ‘No, I really don’t think so.’

‘Why not?’

‘Rolant, you told me that Elen was the only other person to know about the cave. But someone here, maybe Walter, painted that dragon from the carousel.’

‘Don’t *you* know about it?’ says Rolant.

‘Yes, but—’

‘Who did you tell?’

‘No one!’

‘Did you tell Hamilton? Hamilton can’t keep secrets.’

‘I didn’t tell him,’ I insist, ‘or anyone else. Would Elen have told anyone?’

‘Only me,’ Rolant says firmly. ‘She said if she told anyone else all her hair would fall out and it didn’t, did it? And if I told anyone...’

Stillness for a moment, waiting for him to go on. He seems to be unravelling some painful words, retreating into memories of his sister.

‘She said I would never see her again,’ he says finally, hanging his head.

‘It’s not your fault. Besides, if someone else knows your secret, what if they know where...’ I pause to choose my words. ‘They could have some clue about Elen too.’

He lifts his head suddenly: ‘Shall we look in Kizette’s room? For clues?’

‘Kizette’s room?’ I repeat, surprised by his boldness. ‘We can’t just—’

‘Walter plays checkers with Dafina now and Kizette sits with Mr. 7AM because she cheats,’ Rolant goes on rapidly. ‘Are you busy or will you help? Don’t you think Walter knows about the secret place? Has clues about Elen?’

‘We could get into trouble,’ I say slowly because his expression is so hopeful, ‘and we could be wrong about the painting.’

‘So it was a yellow Kizette then?’

I shake my head. ‘No, but we didn’t see Walter’s picture.’

‘Dafina says *sharing is caring*. So everyone’s work has to go on the table at the end, doesn’t it?’

I consider this for a moment. Why would Walter refuse to show something he likely displayed moments earlier? Was he just being difficult?

‘Kizette seemed to dislike me,’ I reflect, ‘enough not to share.’

‘She didn’t use her kind words,’ Rolant nods, ‘*or* do good listening. That’s not being a good friend, is it?’ He strides across the room to the coat pegs. ‘I’m going to look in her room for clues,’ he concludes. He collects my green coat, proffers it to me: ‘Are you helping and being a good friend or going to the village shop in the rain?’

\*

An overgrown trail winds into the horizon of trees. I shadow Rolant's loping walk. He wears an unusual expression, a rehearsed kind of determination, and I wonder what he is preparing to uncover in Kizette's room.

The rain has stopped and the sun now winks between the towering evergreens. Blackbirds dart in and out of the water-pocked ground ahead. Soon a mottled wooden fence runs between us and the forest, lapsing in places but then reappearing further on. Beyond it, the forest seems to bend and stir, the wind combing through its branches with a sigh. Now and then, the calm breaks with a violent flap of wings, followed by restless silence.

The fox's bark begins echoing again in my memory, quickens my pace.

We follow the fence until it concludes in a break of trees. In its place runs an overgrown track, thistles swaying through its centre, leading to a distant house.

'Walter and Kizette live there?' I say, squinting at the opaque windows.

'Haven't you been to Bron Haul yet? Not even for dinner on Thursdays?'

'No.'

We walk on, eventually reaching the gravelled courtyard. It stands empty, a crumbling wall just visible beneath a blanket of moss. Rolant leads us up to a side door, secreted behind the water tank.

Reality begins to settle within me like stones.

'Rolant, do you know the owner? I don't think we can just go in.'

He stops to regard me, his passive expression shifting slightly. 'Why would I not know the owner?'

'Well,' I consider, 'who owns it? Walter? It seems big; he must live with... others.'

I look back the way we have come, trying to remember what Addfwyn said about life at Dyffryn Tŷ. A feeling of terrible smallness surfaces; I am not helping her today but busy trespassing with Rolant.

'Wouldn't they still be my neighbour?' insists Rolant. 'Wouldn't I still know them? Go for dinner there? Because their house is close to mine?'

'I don't know.'

'But aren't they your neighbours too? Or is your house very, very far away? What are *your* neighbours' names?'

'I don't know,' I admit again, shamefacedly. I consider mumbling something about the Alsatian in Bedlinog but realise I don't know his name either.

'Didn't you meet everyone when you arrived? Didn't they give you a tour and a cake with your name on it?'

'No, not really.'

'What about Rhosyn? Or was she ill and shouting again?'

I recall my first evening with Rhosyn. She intended to make us dinner until we found that, during the previous drunken night, she put every item of food into the outdoor freezer as well as the kettle.

'She was ill,' I confirm.

We both stare up at the house, a 'home sweet home' embroidery sunning itself in the top window. Resting outside is a one-pedalled, rusting bicycle with its handlebars casting a long reddish stain down the wall. I note the yellow alarm system winking directly above.

'We can't just go in,' I say, pointing.

'Don't all houses have those?' Rolant says indifferently. 'Walter and Kizette will still be busy. Shall we go in now?'

'It will be locked,' I say, almost hopefully, as he advances.

The door has a lean, white patio-style handle which at first, when tried, appears secure. But when Rolant pulls it vertically, we hear a distinct click. He pushes, and enters, as simply as if all the world's doors were open to him.

I check around, weighing what will look more suspicious: being found inside, or loitering outside while someone else trespasses within.

The forest beyond rustles and whispers, the breeze plying the patio plants in their pots.

I take a breath and a final look over my shoulder... no one. Beyond the door lies a narrow kitchen lined with pine cabinets. I step over a large basket of kindling, listening for Rolant.

I find him in the living room. There is more pine furniture, a lifeless old beanbag, and a wood burner. An oval table with two candles takes up most of the space. I imagine Walter and Kizette sitting there to eat breakfast or to do other everyday things—a thought which only increases the strangeness of prowling around like a thief. Rolant stands poised on the shag carpet. I motion a silent greeting and he points up the staircase.

I nod, feebly.

The boards creak. On the narrow landing some doors are open, revealing in passing: a grey-tiled bathroom; a double bedroom with more candles and a tea set; and then a small room with its bed laden with layers of animal toys. Rolant walks us quickly to an end door and disappears through it.

Inside, it is dim and crowded. Three dressers are cramped in, burdened with old books. The walls are lost in an immense collage of black and white photographs, war posters, and reproductions of classical paintings. Various relics are muddled into the confusion of books: an aged grey typewriter, a turn-dial radio, vintage cigar tins, an old dollhouse. In one corner there is an unmade bed, where Rolant has already begun his search.

He hastily lifts each of the pillows above his head, glances in the space left behind, and then replaces it. Kneeling on the threadbare rug, he pulls open the drawers of the bedside table. Several worn books are removed and then quickly discarded on the floor behind him.

'*Be careful!*' I hiss, joining him on the rug.

I gather the books, studying their fraying spines. Most of the outer lettering is faded and I can only make out a few words: *Evola*, *Mylius* and three labelled *Wilhem*. I retrieve another as Rolant dismisses it: *Wirth*. The spine cracks open to a page with a monochrome engraving, similar to the one of Saint Michael. In this one, a winged figure also rises above the landscape, but a black circle looms at his back, eclipsing half the scene in darkness. Below, there is some gothic print but the language is foreign. Someone has circled one of the words in pencil: *heilsbringer*.

'*Heilsbringer?*' I say aloud. 'What does that mean?'

Rolant looks over his shoulder at me. 'Is it a clue?'

I can only shrug and he returns to his search through the drawer. He disturbs a dark blue case near the back, inspects it closely, and then offers it up to me.

'More of those funny words,' he says. 'What do they mean?'

I trace the faded gold letters: *Deutscher Fallschirmjäger*. 'I think... it could be German?'

Opening it, there is nothing but an ashen, empty lining, though there remains a distinct impression in it. 'For a medal?' I stroke the deep circular shape left behind, wondering why the case would have been kept without it.

'Is it Walter's? Did he win something?'

'It looks old,' I say, examining the dull lettering and spotted exterior.

I place it carefully back into the drawer, organising the books in front of it in what I hope were their original places.

‘What does clues look like?’ Rolant asks. ‘Have we found any of those yet?’

‘We should be careful,’ I say, ‘we should be leaving everything as we find it.’

‘Why?’

‘We don’t want anyone to know we were here.’

‘Does Walter have to leave things how he finds them in Dryslwyn?’

‘Dryslwyn?’

‘That’s where Toby and I live, isn’t it? Should Walter leave our things how he finds them when he visits Dryslwyn?’

‘Walter visits?’

‘He’s my neighbour,’ Rolant insists, ‘don’t your neighbours visit?’

I turn and wander over to the dollhouse. What *are* we here for? I bend to peer into the house, finding old-fashioned little rooms. In one there is a table at which several wax dolls dine, wooden cakes lining a yellowing lace cloth. And suddenly I suspect that this might have the same origin as the cave toys. There is another wax doll, in brown dated clothes, poised out on the veranda. I glimpse stairs behind him, leading up to the closed second floor. Feeling at the side of the house, and discovering the latch, the top of the house swings open; I manage to catch it just before it strikes the wall.

I try to find my voice.

‘R-Rolant...’

‘Have you found something?’

He hurries over and looks immediately into the upper rooms of the house. He steps back: ‘I don’t like that.’

My heart begins to race. ‘Have you seen this before?’ I manage, pointing.

Rolant pulls his hat down, slowly and around his ears. ‘I don’t like that,’ he says again.

I reach in for a moment, turn the solitary chair around, and Rolant takes another step backwards. Still holding his hat, he slowly shakes his head in a repeated silent ‘no’.

‘I think this was a bad idea Rolant. You never said...’ I blink hard. ‘This was a very bad idea.’

He continues shaking his head.

‘We need to leave,’ I say firmly, ‘n—’

I freeze and stare, finding he is doing the same. He heard it too: the low creak on the stair.

I glance frantically around the room to the obvious hiding places like under the bed, behind dressers, considering even the ceiling in my desperation. But there’s nowhere.

The stairs creak.

Suddenly there is a hand in mine, pulling me along and out.

*Creak.*

Time seems to slow and unravel as Rolant navigates the corridor, passing and peering in doors like images on a flashing picture reel.

*Creak, Creak, Creak.*

I recall fingernail tracks on clawed-out dollhouse floors. There again is the little red chair in its corner, facing the wall. My trembling finger reaching for it, turning it by the fragile leg.

CREAK, CREAK, CREAK!

The little figure made of wax.

*Breathing.*

Any moment we will be discovered and I see a flash of the doll's face again. The scratched-out eyes and the melted black scream. A scream that seemed to rise from the shredded walls like a fox's from the depths of the forest. At its feet lies the other doll, its head melted into the tiny floorboards, a ball at its side as though moments before they were happily playing.

We are suddenly standing in the room with the soft animals. Rolant is holding one of them with both hands, offering it to me in a strangely artificial way.

A figure appears in the doorway, casting a shadow into the room.

'What are you d-doing with Trevor?' bellows the voice.

It takes me a moment, my mind spinning with terror, to recognise Faelan.

'Did you leave him behind, in Hafan?' Rolant says.

'Didn't. Wrong. N-no!'

'Did he say we could play with him?'

She glares at me, a thin crust of something cracking at her quivering jowls, '...NO!'

'Trevor says you did.'

She considers this for a moment, twisting her hands and shifting from one leg to the other. 'Does he r-really Rolant?'

'Are you angry with him?'

'Y-NO! Stupid frog.' She marches over and snatches Trevor and throws him on the bed. 'Stay there T-Trevor! You're not allowed out, not YOUR t-u-urn yet.' She smacks the frog hard and once, causing it to bounce off and land, belly up, on the carpet.

'Are you busy with Trevor now?' Rolant asks, edging to the door.

'He's s-sleeping.'

'Do you want us to leave?'

She shrugs, and then looks me up and down: 'Do you w-want to see my dog?'

Ambling over to the bedside table, she opens a drawer and removes a small plastic pillbox.

'H-he might be sleeping too though,' she says and frumps down on the bed and punches the space next to her: 'S-sit DOWN!'

Rolant and I sit either side as she clicks open the plastic hinge, revealing a bright red ladybird on a leaf.

'He's a Dal-al-almatian,' she says proudly.

'What is he called?' I ask.

'DALM-M-MATION!'

As she shouts, the immobile ladybird falls, with a tap, onto its side.

'He l-likes to do that.'

'Is he busy then? Does he want us to leave?' Rolant asks, eyeing the door.

My stomach emits a loud groan.

'Are you staying f-f-f-for lunch?' asks Faelan, closing the box and getting up to return it to its drawer. She then turns and stares unblinkingly at me, saying: 'Have to tell Saoirse, before twelve th-th-thirty, if *you* want lunch.'

Rolant gets up and walks over to the door. 'Does Saorise always forget to buy more mustard?'

'Isn't. Wrong! N-no! Don't need m-mustard with rarebit!'

'Isn't everything better with mustard?'

'R-rarebit with m-m-mustard!' Faelan sticks out her long tongue: 'Yuck!'

Rolant begins waving, saying: '*Goodbye, see you soon!*' in a well-practised tone before abruptly disappearing into the hall.

I flash an unreturned smile at Faelan and then hurry after him, catching him on the stairs, the creaking still running through me like shards of ice. Faelan, our new alibi, does not follow and we carry on straight out of the house and back into the midday sun.

‘Does your emperor doll look like the one in the house?’ Rolant asks quietly, as we descend the track.

‘No.’ I say. ‘And it’s a Clay Figure Zhang, not a doll. And not...’ I swallow uncomfortably, ‘like what we saw *in there*.’

‘Clay figure van?’

‘Zhang. A shelf figure. About this big,’ I indicate with my hands. ‘It’s from Tianjin.’

‘The big city like Cardiff? Is that where your neighbours live?’

‘No, just my brother. Well, Mama too.’ I frown. ‘I have the emperor figure and Ri has the other, the empress, in Tianjin remember?’

Rolant walks and speaks a little quicker. ‘Is it far away? How many miles away is it? How many hours would it take on the bus? Which bus do you catch to see him?’

‘Very far. And he is always busy. But sometimes I will still imagine him here, a part of everything.’ I glance back at the house. ‘He would know what to do... about *what we found*.’

‘I didn’t like it,’ he repeats in way of agreement. ‘Who did that to Walter and Kizette’s dollhouse? Shall I tell Mrs Craddock that someone is breaking things and not buying them again? Because it’s *antisocial*?’

I realise suddenly that this did not occur to me before, that it may not have been Walter himself who did it. Have I been foolish? But when I think of Kizette’s head striking the table, the horrible sound of it, his face...

Yet I think I can agree with Rolant on one point: ‘We should tell someone.’

‘Should we? Are you going to tell someone? What will you say?’

We pass through the long shadows between evergreens and I reflect on what would sound the most convincing. However, the more I word and reword the events, the less believable they become. I feel foolish just imagining trying to tell Rhosyn. And worse envisioning it written on a postcard to Ri.

‘I don’t know what I would say,’ I conclude finally. ‘I’m not sure I understand it all yet.’ Rolant looks immediately disappointed so I go on: ‘The dollhouse might still be a clue though. It did look like the cave toys.’

‘We’re not telling about the melted doll? The broken bits? Broken like the dragon’s head? *If you see something, say something*,’ Rolant recites. ‘And we’ve seen broken things, haven’t we?’

‘I just think if we show anyone the top of the—’ I stop suddenly.

‘What is it? Are you resting again?’

‘No Rolant,’ I say quietly, feeling my heart race. ‘We left the top of the house open.’

\*

I awake suddenly, wet with sweat, ears ringing. The room is dark and close. *What was I dreaming?* My hand fumbles for the light.

As the yellow glow spreads, fuzzy around the edges of cardboard boxes, I kick off the clammy quilts and stretch out, eyes to the ceiling. Something has awoken me for the third time.

A noise is still sounding in my ears, gradually fading, but I know it did not come from within the cottage: a deep, guttural bellowing, echoing through layers of rock.

Beneath the bed, I find the painted box containing Baba's folding book. I slowly double and collapse the pages until it lies open, resting against the pale sheets, revealing the last image. I trace the seared edges. The dragon's teeth glow in the lamplight. Little by little, the image seems to blur, merging with the black inks of enclosing cave walls.

My head slowly drops. I am in the cave again running, something behind me. I think I hear a voice, calling my name... *Baba?*

Suddenly, I am roused by the phone dancing on the bedside table. No one ever calls this late, unless? Hoping it hasn't awoken Rhosyn, I grope at it and press several buttons all at once.

'H—hel—Hello?'

'Wéi?'

'Hello?'

'Tian, Miao?'

I recognise the accent but not the voice. 'Yes?'

'Zengrui,' the speaker says flatly, conceding to English. 'This is Miao, yes?'

'Yes. Zengrui?' I blearily consider the time, 'calling from Tianjin?'

'Yes, *yes* call from Tianjin. Please tell where Ri mother is staying? This is important.'

I sit up. 'What has happened?'

'Nothing to worry. Name of her address, please?'

'But...' I look around the dim room, 'I don't know. She... left. She left for China, months ago.'

'Tianjin address, please?'

'She didn't say. But Ri must know? What's happening?'

There is a long pause where he exhales through his nose. 'Ri cannot find. She not speaking with Chinese connections.'

'She's... disappeared?'

'Bank call today saying card is in debt,' Zengrui states in his businesslike tone. 'Last used to buy drink in bar near WèiJin canal. This all.'

'Where is Ri?'

He snorts. 'He search in Tianjin now! He wants talk with mother. But will not look too hard, I think she find new husband. She enjoy such life.'

'What?'

'People talk. Bar say she drink. She play big money games. Vendor say she sell jewellery sometime. Both say there is new man; so let *him* worry. Ri not look long, only finding shame.'

His words seem to repeat again and again, multiplying the way voices did through the cave.

'I need to speak to Ri.'

'Ri not here. You speak with Zengrui now and, some time, Ri when he not so busy.'

'When?'

'Oh, sometime he call you...'

'I need to know where she is!'

'Questions cost Ri more face. Better not to know.'

'What can I do?'

'If mother call you, you call restaurant and ask for Zengrui.'

And the line goes dead.

\*



The rain falls heavily across the fields as I squelch across. Gates drip and trees hang low, the grass turning to mud. My umbrella sags.

As I turn into the road for The Red Dragon, I see someone in a pair of bright, ladybird wellingtons outside the village shop. Raising my umbrella, I recognise they belong to Faelan, squat and sodden, her face pressing determinedly against the shop's window.

I consider crossing the road, feigning I haven't seen her. Yet, something about the way she is standing, abandoned in the cold, forces me to stay on course. Coming closer, I hear she is muttering to herself.

'Good morning Faelan.'

'S-stupid trees!' she shouts, not taking her face from the glass. 'T-trees making e-everything stupid and wet.'

I maintain my pace, intending to carry on but she suddenly leaps across the path, arms and legs spread, like a troll catching something on its bridge. 'S-stupid TREES!' she roars at me.

'Trees?'

'In the f-forest.' She points savagely. 'They d-drop all th-the rain!'

'And the clouds,' I try, conversationally.

'Isn't, wrong, n-no! Clouds are made of air, stupid g-girl! Trees d-drop it.'

'Oh... rain comes from trees?'

Faelan nods knowingly: 'H-haven't you seen it coming out of the le-leaves? All the l-little droppy b-bits? Don't you know *anything*?'

She stands with her hands on her hips, soaked and glaring. I sense this is now a toll bridge.

'Right,' I say, becoming impatient. 'Well I need to go t—'

'Where are y-you going?' she demands, blocking the path again.

'The Red Dragon,' I say quickly, 'Addfwyn is waiting.'

'Will A-Addfwyn come and open the sh-shop?'

I consider the cardboard sign on the door: CLOSED.

'No.'

'Isn't, wrong, n-no! Saoirse needs milk!' she takes a grubby coin from her pocket and holds it to my face. 'M-M-MILK!'

'Addfwyn doesn't own the shop,' I say, stepping back. 'I have to go.'

'But w-was shut yesterday t-too!' she snaps, wiping her sopping hair from her eyes. 'When is it open?'

'I don't know but I have to—'

'What were you doing with T-Trevor yesterday?' Faelan says, her eyes narrowing.

'Who?'

'Trevor my F-FROG!' her voice booms through the street, echoing unpleasantly.

'Nothing. I need to go.'

'Why are your eyes r-red then?'

I rub them impatiently, shaking my head. 'Just tired.'

'M-My eyes are red when I'm in t-trouble! You're in trouble t-too!'

She folds her arms triumphantly.

'If I'm late, yes!' I make to dodge past her again but she continues to block, surprisingly agile for her stocky build.

'Y-You went into his room *without a-asking*.'

I grip the umbrella, 'what?'

'W-Walter's room. You played with the little people house! Isn't, wrong, n-no, n-not allowed!'

I glance quickly around; nothing but the rain in the street.

'We didn't... *not really*,' I say weakly.

'T-Trevor saw you!'

'Doing what?'

'O-opening the a-a-a-a-attic! Naughty, not allowed. We put it back so she didn't think it was us! But T-Trevor thinks he will have to tell K-Kizette now.'

'No,' I say, mind racing, 'what if, *what if* he has to keep it a secret?'

'*Has t-to?*' she says dangerously.

'Because... Well, because—because Hamilton said so.'

'Hamilton?'

'Yes, Hamilton would be very angry if Trevor told his secret.'

'Hamilton was looking in the little p-people house too?'

'Yes,' I say unwillingly, 'but only because he had to.'

'W-why?' raindrops travel slowly down her monobrow.

'I don't know if I can tell you—I mean—*Trevor*.'

'Why not?'

'Hamilton wants his secret to be kept.'

'I wouldn't t-tell! Tell Hamilton I wouldn't tell!'

'Well...'

'P-P-Please? Won't tell. Never t-tell.'

'I suppose you could help. Help Hamilton, I mean.'

'R-Really?' She immediately begins to bend at the knees in an accordion-like dance. 'Yes! Let me help H-Hamilton!'

I step closer. The edge of my umbrella casts a long shadow across our conversation.

As we speak, I am thinking about Mama: wandering, staggering the steaming alleyways, sweating and drinking in the heat of China. Ri calls out her name from the shelter of a rickshaw... but she no longer recognises him. I imagine him calling out to me too and I don't answer either. I can only see myself here in this street of rain, as if from a distance. My lips move but I am not sure of what I am saying, only that it must be said if I can't recover my family, if I am to regain Rolant's instead.

'That will make Kizette very a-angry!' Faelan is saying. 'T-Taking is not allowed.'

'Will you do it or not?'

'T-Taking Kizette is n-not—'

'Hamilton needs it,' I insist.

'B-B-But Kizette said n-never to touch *her* or the little p-people house! She will definitely pull my h-hair again. I hated it when she pulled out my h-hair!'

I grip the umbrella even tighter: 'She pulled out your hair?'

'I b-brushed her hair when Wal-Walter was away,' Faelan says, miserably rubbing her own. 'B-But she told Walter I pulled too much. She said I must l-learn a l-lesson but I screamed and s-s-s-screamed! Saoirse ran in and said I musn't p-pull out m-my hair and scream. *Isn't, wrong, n-NO!* She says dolls can't p-pull out hair, only people and to tell the truth. And Walter did *th-this*.' She slowly raises one stubby finger to her lips. '*This means keep my secret*,' she whispers from behind the finger.

I slowly put my finger to my own lips. My heart quickens as I steady my voice enough to ask: 'Do you keep a lot of Walter's secrets?'

She looks at me intently. Something flickers behind those deep-set eyes. Something darts, a flash like a shadow fox passing between the vigils of trees. Things

more terrible than secrets stir there, sights and sounds, the echoes living behind dark lashes.

‘Not anymore Faelan,’ I say. Then lowering my voice: ‘Just do what I have said. Can you take what we need and not be seen?’

But she doesn’t speak. Just nods, very carefully, the finger still pressed deep, like a knife’s blade, resting dangerously across her dripping skin.



Inside The Red Dragon, the rain is drumming on the roof. As I slide the grey cloth across the tables, I imagine the rain is wiping the world outside too: Faelan's wet skin; her corn-yellow teeth, glittering; the words between us; all smeared and disappearing into drains.

'Against you've finished wiping that table, there'll be no time for the rest, bach!'

Addfwyn shakes her head behind the bar and I realise she is right; my hand has been pushing circles into the same table since I arrived.

'Sorry,' I mumble, carrying the bucket over to another.

'Not a smile on that face for ages!' she continues. 'Too much time with that funny article from Dyffryn Tŷ? Only that's what the boyos round here are sayin' at me. Not bein' funny like, Rolant isn't a bad one but there's some I wouldn't take my eyes off. Nothin' funny like that, is it? One of 'em givin' trouble?'

'No, nothing like that,' I say quickly.

I try to concentrate on smearing more circles across the table.

'Well something's at you, I can tell. Now you just tell Addfwyn, see if I can't buck you up!'

She bustles over and sits determinedly at the wet table, rain slipping down the window behind. She pushes back her white hair and folds her arms. The alert eyes glint in her weather-worn face. I see she will not be diverted.

'Well, there is one—'

'AHA! I knew it!' she slaps her knee triumphantly. 'No use saying stories to me! Knew an article from up there got you miserable as sin. Let's have it then my girl,' she leans in, '*what they done?*'

'Nothing really.'

'Oh, now don't go thinking I'm not feeling toward 'em,' she insists. 'You got to expect antics off 'em now and then! Mind, if they trying to push some rubbish off on you? Let's have a name at least!'

'Walter?'

'Ooooh, now I'm not bein' funny like but I'm remembering him from when I was young. He was one of the first Dyffryn Tŷ ever took in; a real lump of a boy then. Oh, it's all coming back now!' She reclines in the chair, smiling to herself. 'Seems only yesterday I caught 'im aiming stones at the turkeys from Pencraig Farm. Birds cryin' belfago, going all directions they were! And there he was, aimin' away and I says to him, I says: *Oy! There's a way to carry on: aimin' stones at the birds what feeds us!* And you know what he calls back to me? Brazen's not the word for it! The little beggar only tells me it wasn't him! Well would you believe it? Ooooah, he was just cheeky beyond. I says to him: *I know it was you; I seen you aiming those stones!* And he blames it all on Bwci-bo, some ghostie he's made up, standing there, as I tell him: *oh you're cute all right, not flies on you, but me mam'll be callin' your farm just the same boyo! See if she don't!*'

'And did she?'

'First off! And I fancy I heard old Aderyn Craddock almost fell it down when she heard what my mam was sayin' on the other end! Heard later she was havin' forty fits, she was. Seems Walter's mam, whoever she was, were desperate to keep him

tucked away up there.' She lowers her voice for a moment to add: '*A little half-German one like that could soon have been packed off in a hurry if it suited us, desperate or not!*' Her voice explodes back into its normal volume: 'AAAAh but no! They sent the little fly one down to us. Full pelt down here he came, with what looked a guinea-worth of flowers. Mind, he still kept his eyes down, still frumping, I could see! Not a bit of *real* sorry in him that day. Bit of the *glad and sorry* all right: glad to have done it; sorry to have been caught!' She shakes her head disapprovingly. 'No, it didn't stop him picking all the goosegogs from the gwli to throw at windows later; then into everythin' in the sheds; sittin' on the chapel wall eating his losins before tea, looking daggers at everyone in the village. Always lost the bus to school until they stopped even sending him. Oooooah, right kokum that one! They said he got an ignorant, ikey nature from his German father. Times in those years some could've cheerfully hit him sick. Heard nothing of him lately, mind. But now 'e making fresh trouble with you is it?'

'It's nothing really,' I say, trying to sound casual. 'Just a feeling.'

'Well you watch out how you talk to him, if he is any the same, *like a match* he was! You could tell him off and all you'd get was a mouthful. Took the heads off all old Mair's roses once. There she was screamin', bell in every tooth, she was after him she was, calling out to him: *I'll 'alf murder you if I get my hands on you!* And would you believe it? He was there shoutin' foul names back on her, from the top of the lane, and still sayin' that it weren't him! Like she didn't just catch him out with the cutters.'

'He does say some strange things...'

Her eyes narrow, 'What things, bach?'

But before I can answer, Owen and Gethin burst through the door, both drenched.

'Bore da!' bellows Gethin, slapping his sopping Dai cap on the coat stand.

Owen just nods, removing his glistening puffer jacket and ambling over to his usual stool at the bar.

'I need to swill a few cups in the bosh before I make the tea,' Addfwyn calls to Owen. 'Can I expect your boys in?'

'Tomos not got much money to play with. It's from taking all them shameful buses to town!' he grumbles, not looking up from the bar. 'He says to me: *Not today Da; I've only got a pound odd on me!* Tell him I'll pick it up but no.' He sighs deeply before going on. 'Osian says he don't know for certain if he'll be coming or no; says *he's got a sickener now!* Parading to the toilet all night he was.' He looks gloomily at his watch. 'Now only I'm coming down here! It's pelting out and my boys have picked up with the type who don't go out in any but high sunshine. Both soft on the fancy coffees nowadays and they're nothing for tea. No, Addfwyn, they don't fancy breakfast piglydd down here with old Da' anymore.'

There is an awkward pause where Gethin appears intensely preoccupied with the removal of his coat.

'Oh, get your gummel up Owen!' Addfwyn says finally. 'Least you can go by us anytime.'

'Nasty weather now but there's hopes for it later,' offers Gethin, almost cheerfully, wringing his Dai cap onto the floor.

Owen grunts. 'How's it lookin' for that tea then?'

Addfwyn winks at me and leaves for the kitchen. Just as she reaches the door, she says: 'What do you two remember about Walter Dyffryn Tŷ?'

'That half-soaked one?' Gethin says, going to sit at the bar. 'Hasn't been allowed in the village shop with the rest in years. Not since he caused that big palaver

'bout his ball. Straight through the window it came! Mind 'e never knocked about with the rest of that funny lot anyway. Always the loner he was.'

'Aye,' Owen nods, 'they say his mother must have been livin' tally somewhere, and mixed up with a German.'

'Tally?' I ask timidly, coming to the bar.

Owen and Gethin shift uncomfortably on their stools.

'You explain the thing,' Owen mumbles, elbowing Gethin. 'How's it lookin' for that tea, Addfwyn?'

'Don't keep on will you?' her voice calls from the depths of the kitchen. 'You shall have it now—in a minute!'

Gethin's face looks flushed as he tries, head lowered, to explain *the thing* to the bar. 'Now we're not picking up on, er, someone's business if they want to...' He clears his throat, abruptly elbowing Owen, who almost falls off his stool. 'You explain it!'

They argue rapidly in Welsh and then Owen appears to relent: 'It means,' he says, his bushy eyebrows furrowing low across his small eyes, 'living without the blessing of the clergy! Unmarried like.'

Gethin coughs.

'Pisio cath?' Addfwyn calls from the kitchen.

'Strong for me!' Owen bellows.

'Aye, strong!' Gethin calls out, still red.

'This weather do play the bear with the joints,' Owen grumbles, rubbing his shoulder. 'Any road, why all this talk about Walter Dyffryn Tŷ?'

'Addfwyn was remembering... some things he did,' I say, placing coasters on the bar.

'Aye, caused heaps of ructions between us and them lot at Dyffryn Tŷ, he once did,' Gethin says. 'Didn't take notice of any, even when they spoke to him sharp.'

'Under the doctor more than the rest,' Owen nods. 'Still, taught him a lesson when we finally said he wasn't to come down the village again; he's been skulking nowhere but round Dyffryn Tŷ in a soc ever since. So there for him!'

'And if I remember right Owen,' Gethin says, 'wasn't it your Da' that went up and talked Dyffryn Tŷ straight?'

'Aye,' nods Owen. 'Knocked Aderyn Craddock's door and said Dyffryn Tŷ could pay for a new shop window and not to send the boy on anymore.'

'Times like that when you do catch yourself thinkin' they can't help 'em all.'

'Of course not!' Owen snorts. 'It's a bit thick thinkin' the real bad 'uns will do any better than hammerin' tack for tourists. Craddock'll still take 'em on though! Ah, come summer they'll bring the lot of 'em down, even the bad ones, pickin' the whimberries for jam,' Owen waves his finger at me, 'and then you'll see the real mob they've got up at that farm.'

'Oh, the girl's been up there already,' Gethin says knowingly. 'Been round with that star turn, Rolant, haven't you my girl?'

'Yes, how did you—?'

Gethin laughs. 'I haven't been peepin'! No, all this nasty weather got their trouthing backed up. Some still knock my door for odd jobs see, then we get to talking.'

'Suppose *you* seen old Walter then? Still wearin' the same slouch hat and braces?' snipes Owen.

'Nothing much of him,' replies Gethin, 'only once or twice caught an eyeful of him. Up Dyffryn Tŷ, they'll tell you he's no trouble anymore.'

'Ha! I'm not too struck by it,' says Owen.

‘Miao threw it up to me again,’ Addfwyn says, suddenly reappearing with the tea. ‘Ware-teg if he’s gone straight now.’

‘What she throwin’ it up again for though? Trouble again is it?’ says Owen.

He turns to me and I see something, a memory perhaps, some thought revolving silently behind the dark pupils.

‘He just seems...’ I begin.

They all lean in at the bar like animals at an empty trough.

‘He just seems,’ I say, ‘well, *angry*.’ They all continue to lean. ‘He got angry... with me,’ I say, flatly.

‘Did he now?’ crows Addfwyn.

‘Got angry?’ says Gethin.

‘*You be careful*,’ growls Owen.

We all look at him now. He has the teacup in his hand and he stares into it with a grim, guarded expression.

‘Go on then our Owen!’ Addfwyn says. ‘Don’t you leave it there now. What you keepin’ under your hat?’

‘What *do* you know Owen?’ Gethin says.

‘Stop aggravating me now with all your questions,’ Owen says. ‘Just a thing I heard.’

‘Oh, you’re all jaw Owen!’ crows Addfwyn, filling his cup from the old teapot. ‘Don’t say stories now.’ There is a gleam in her eye.

‘I’m not sayin’ stories!’ Owen insists. ‘He’s still not all there, is all I know.’

‘So what you mean, *not all there* then?’ she says lightly.

Owen sighs, pushing the tea away from him. ‘It was nasty business. Not for company’s hearing.’

‘What did he do?’ I find myself asking.

He glances at all of us: ‘Now you carn go canting about a bit of this after.’

‘Ah, let’s have it Owen,’ says Gethin, slapping his knee, ‘before this tea o’ mine is stone cold!’

‘So vet came to see one of ours the once,’ Owen begins slowly. ‘Sorry young heifer she was; I’d tried everything for her complaint, but there was no coming to her. So I says to the vet: *Not much cop in this one now, not a calf from her and poor dab can’t even stand. I know you never seen such a sorry animal in all your life!* So then he gets to telling me he was up Dyffryn Tŷ not a night ago...’

‘Go on our Owen!’ prompts Addfwyn.

‘Said they had him go on the hop up there, sayin’ stories about two lambs fixed in a fence. So when he gets there, he sees Craddock’s trying to cwat the truth of it. She tried all the dodges, he says, but he could see right through. He had a job saving one lamb, tried his level best he did but still lost the other. Sure he was, that it weren’t no trouble in the fence, very sure. Said there was this one they called Walter, bein’ *rough*. He had to tell him real sharp to loose go of those two lambs. *How rough* I asked him, and he was shaking his head and gettin’ all choked up. *Too rough*... not right that that one. Still goes right through me.’

The rain drums outside and my heart races.

‘Owen! Fancy sayin’ stories like that in company!’ Addfwyn says, and she clouts him roughly on the arm. ‘No more of that here! You got Miao looking pale, hasn’t he, bach? You havin’ a cup of tea in your hand? Or go have it by the tab—’

‘I need to go,’ I say.

‘Where at this time?’ Addfwyn says, glaring at Owen. ‘Now if *that one*’s stories have—’

‘I need to speak to Rolant,’ I say, not caring who knows it now.

‘What’s the time by you?’ Addfwyn asks the two men before checking her own watch as they just continue to stare. ‘Well, they’ll all be at chapel now so no use telephonin’ the farm. You’ll have to—*bach, where are you off to?* Not out in that rain!’

I am already slipping the damp coat from the stand onto my back.

‘Which chapel?’

‘Their own; Nyth Bran Chapel. Other side of Crythor Forest.’

‘How do I get there?’

‘I’ll take you,’ Owen says suddenly getting up. He walks over and snatches the keys from inside Gethin’s Dai cap. ‘Taking her in the gambo so we don’t sink in flooding,’ he says, shaking the keys at Gethin.

‘Get away! Going out in that! What’s going on?’ Addfwyn cries.

‘You can go by the gambo anytime,’ Gethin shrugs. ‘No need to fuss.’

‘Sorry!’ I say pulling the door and meeting a spray of rain.

‘You’ll finish the tables this afternoon then?’

‘Yes!’

I tear out into the rain, forgetting my umbrella at the stand.

‘Over here!’ Owen calls, his puffer jacket half on, waving like a lopsided scarecrow at the old tractor.

He climbs up to the compartment, using the enormous dripping tire as a step. Flinging the door open, a barking collie almost springs free. He whistles once and it allows him to shoulder it back inside.

Taking his rough hand, I climb in next to the dog which licks and forces itself between us. I slam the compartment shut and the old engine rumbles and then roars into life. We are immediately jostled together in a vibrating world of engine sounds and wet-dog smell, propelled forwards through the thundering rain.

As we go, I see nothing but fast-moving trails of water, running down the compartment glass. I suspect Owen can’t see either, rather following the Braille-like directions of bumps and ditches in familiar lanes.

‘Thank you!’ I shout over the engine, the collie panting at my cheek.

At first I think he has not heard me; he continues to squint through the bleary rivers across the windshield. Then he finally shouts back: ‘I know you got something under your hat!’ He elbows the collie back and looks over at me: ‘You can get a feeling for these things. And, like the weather, you feel it first in your bones.’ He holds my gaze for a moment more, and then his eyes return to the road.

There is nothing but rain, roaring, and shuddering for a long time and then eventually we start to slow.

‘Are we here?’ I ask quickly.

‘Aye, Nyth Bran’s just up there. You hop out,’ Owen says, leaning over to open the door for me. ‘You be careful now,’ he adds, taking the collie’s collar as I struggle down. ‘And if that Walter ever mentions anything funny to you about a girl... you bring it straight to me.’

‘A girl?’

‘Aye,’ says Owen, not looking at me now. ‘*Dilys*. He mentions her, you’ll bring it to me. And see someone drives you back; no more gallivanting in the forest.’

‘Who said—?’ I say, attempting to squint up at him from the road.

‘Just a feeling,’ Owen says, and slams the door.

I hurry into the rain, up the cemetery path and between moss-covered stones, straining to see the grey spire and stained glass through the downpour. I can just make out the chapel’s low porch ahead, hoping I am not too late.



The large oak door is open slightly and I squeeze easily through, my wet feet squelching across the stones. It is quiet inside, only a dull murmuring; someone reciting a prayer within; a plain-clothed minister, bible in hand at the front. Around him in the old wooden pews, heads are bowed and silent. I think I see Rolant's deerstalker among them, near the front. Faelan is sitting alone in the adjacent pew, atop several stacked prayer cushions, and I slide hastily along it.

'Faelan,' I whisper quickly, 'did you already—'

'Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle!' booms the minister abruptly, his plea echoing all around us. 'Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray. Amen!'

'*Faelan?*' I try again. 'I've changed my mind, I don't think we should take—'

'Now please join me in partaking of today's chapter which is found in Revelation, six. As we approach Michaelmas and the eclipse children, it is a time to reflect on the signs of the sky and how they reflect a greater plan, *God's plan*. And God's justice,' he pauses, surveys the congregation. 'The festival of Michaelmas is our celebration, our reminder, of an approaching reckoning!'

'Faelan?'

The minister ascends the steps of the pulpit and runs a hand across the large bible there. Pulling open the page at its embroidered marker, he begins to read in an automatic voice, monotone as an old radio broadcast:

'And when he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth—'

'Faelan, I know you can hear me!'

'—the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.'

'I was wrong,' I hiss, 'whatever I said to do.'

'—the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up—'

'I think Walter might—'

'—and every mountain and island was removed from its place.'

'I think he might—'

'*Shhh!*' someone demands.

'Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks: fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of—,' the minister shifts uncomfortably, glances down before resuming. 'F-for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand—*who can stand*—,' the minister shifts again, as though struggling to secure his footing.

'Faelan, what have you—'

I look up as gasps run through the pews like electricity.

The minister has bent into the pulpit, pausing, lifting something slowly from it. Holding it by one satin shoe, he looks quizzically around at the congregation.

Turning the bedraggled doll the right way up, we see the red stain running down its dress. He holds it at arm's length, reading something, a red inked note around her neck: 'We were—no—she... Ah, *where*—where is she? Where is she!' the minister establishes triumphantly. And turning Kizette to face us all he adds light-heartedly: 'Well, it appears she's here in my pulpit!'

But someone is struggling their way, roughly, along one of the pews. I recognise the back of Walter's faded brown suit, the cloth cap, as it stalks to the pulpit. He stamps up the stone steps, one at a time, arms straight and rigid at his sides.

The minister smiles charitably as Kizette is snatched from him, as he is shoved aside, and as Walter brings up one arm, sharp as a guillotine, down again with the blade of a finger slicing the air; one razor finger cuts the air all the way to the back of the chapel.

‘YOU!’ Kizette’s high voice screams through the congregation.

Every head turns around, following the blade of Walter’s finger, tracing its direction, finding it is narrowly missing my face. Instead it strikes the head of the quivering victim at my side, a little sob escaping from atop her throne of prayer cushions.

Kizette’s voice continues to echo through the stone halls as I see Craddock and several others ascend, attempt to cajole, and then wrestle, an incensed Walter from his podium. Watching them, I suddenly hear Addfwyn’s words, her warning ringing with Kizette’s screams, trapped in my head, the high ceilings, reflected in the stained glass, the frightened faces of a staring congregation, striking red from every cool surface, then finally hissing from my own lips:

*‘Like a match.’*

\*

The congregation filters quietly from the chapel, heads low and hooded beneath slick umbrellas. I wait in the porch for Rolant.

When he finally appears, he is deep in conversation with Mr. 7AM and, like most of the residents, he is talking about Walter.

‘If he washes the dress, will the red come out? Or should he just colour the rest and make it a red dress? Does Kizette like red dresses?’ he is saying.

‘If you sleep in the carriage, you will miss your stop,’ Mr. 7AM offers in reply. ‘Young ladies always missing their stops; poor old husband’s got to pay the fare at the end of the line!’

‘Was she sleeping? Are you allowed to sleep in church? Are you allowed to take the baby Jesus’ cushions? And did he say *you* could borrow one?’

‘These,’ Mr. 7AM stops to hold the prayer cushion up to Rolant’s face, ‘are for the first-class carriages only. Now, if you let me escort you back to your carriage, I won’t have to call the guard.’ He tries to take Rolant’s arm but it is pulled away.

‘Kind hands!’ Rolant says strictly. ‘Are you forgetting to use kind hands?’

‘Nonsense!’ Mr. 7AM says, trying to reclaim the arm. ‘You have *plenty* of leg-room young man. But if you insist on stretching out like that you—’

‘Rolant!’ I say, trying to take his other arm before he walks out into the rain but he pulls that up too, holding them bent and out, like a bird. ‘Rolant, I need to talk to you.’

‘Excuse me, madam!’ says Mr. 7AM, alarmed by the intrusion. ‘This is the non-smoking carriage!’ He holds out the cushion: ‘You put that out! In the tray it goes!’

‘Do you go to this service now?’ Rolant wants to know, lowering his arms.

‘No, I—’

‘Smoking is prohibited on this line young lady,’ Mr. 7AM insists. ‘Don’t make me call the guard. It’s out in the tray or out of the train!’

‘Why are you smoking?’

‘I’m not!’ I lower my voice, looking around at the other residents jostling their way from the porch. ‘I need to talk to you.’

The others all appear in high spirits, excited by the commotion. A few are animatedly re-enacting the event, a wild-eyed woman incessantly crowing: ‘*You!*’ as others scream their own versions.

Hamilton now emerges from the chapel, placidly arm in arm with Martin. They seem, at first, the only members unaffected. But as they pass by, I notice even Martin is pointing his finger at different badges on his jumper, silently mouthing: 'You!'

'Do you want to talk to the guard?' presses Mr. 7AM.

'Are you not going to put it out?' Rolant asks.

I impatiently mime an imaginary cigarette into the prayer cushion.

'A clean carriage means a clean journey,' states Mr. 7AM, tucking it under his arm. 'Tickets please!' he then calls, hastening after Hamilton and Martin. 'Excuse me sir, but has your son paid? If he's big enough for a seat, he's big enough for a ticket. Now, a family pass will be—'

They step out into the rain and soon it is only Rolant and I left below the chapel arch. He stares at me impassively.

'Rolant, I asked Faelan to take Kizette.'

Rolant regards me, his expression unchanged by the revelation. 'Why?' he asks simply.

'Faelan didn't exactly do what I asked. I told her we needed to ask Walter some questions about Elen... not to write questions on Kizette!'

Was she trying to warn him? I recall her, finger on her lips, talking about Walter's secrets. Perhaps she meant to keep them all along? Then again, she could just have easily misunderstood. And Walter *knew* it was her right away, might even punish her. I redden, realising how foolish the plan was.

'Was Walter supposed to shout and throw the Bible at Mrs Craddock?'

I feel myself reddening further. 'No. Is he still in there?'

'He has to stay until help comes. Mrs Craddock doesn't like being hit; it makes her red and cross. Is that why you're red too?'

'I only wanted to look at Kizette,' I say, trying to save face, 'because Walter's doll house gave me an idea.' I lower my voice further: 'I think both might be from the cave. I'd have to look at Kizette more closely to be sure. But if she is, then she'd be the clue we were looking for, the proof that Walter's been down there too.'

Rolant adjusts his deerstalker and looks out into the rain. I wonder what he is really thinking about me, all the trouble I have caused. Yet somehow I feel I can trust him not to say anything about what I've done. I sense it is protected along with all other parts of the main secret, as though all secrets are now intimately related, a steadily growing family of silence.

'Do you still want to look at her?' he says eventually.

'I don't think we should take her again.'

'Taking is not allowed, is it?' Rolant says. 'What about borrowing?'

He dashes out into the rain, firmly holding down both flaps on his hat.

'Hurry, or you'll miss your train!' Mr. 7AM calls after us from the slow procession of umbrellas.

We hasten around the grey side of the chapel, where Rolant stops at a tiny wooden door. He twists the metal ring and it opens easily. We bend inside and step into a vestry, sidling in between the shelves of cups and collection plates. In the centre, chairs and a table are set. A large stand of flat cakes is arranged next to a flowery tea set as though a party is expected to arrive at any moment.

'Why are we in here?' I ask.

'Do we usually have elevenses with Minister Brychan after chapel? Do you like apple-dragons?'

Rolant goes to the table and holds a cake up, powdered sugar sprinkling to the stone floor.

‘Bakestones? Addfwyn makes those.’

‘Bakestones taste like stones. An *apple-dragon*,’ he takes a large bite and carries on thickly: ‘has apple in it so it isn’t dry. Do bakestones have apple? Or are they dry and different?’

‘Dry and different,’ I say. ‘Is that why we came in here? To eat cakes?’

He presses the rest of the apple-dragon into his mouth and walks over to a large antique chest. Despite three large keyholes, when he pulls it, the lid creaks easily open. He then reaches in and pulls out a rather rumpled looking object.

‘Kizette!’

‘Do you want to wake her? Or should you be quieter?’

He places her carefully down next to the teapot, still horizontal, her lashes quivering slightly but closed.

‘She always sleeps here during services,’ he says, ‘because Minister Brychan says she doesn’t have a soul and chapel is for people with souls, isn’t it?’

I reach for her but he immediately whips Kizette away, still horizontal in mid-air: ‘Are you going to take her again?’

‘No!’ I say, embarrassed. ‘I said that was a mistake. Just let me see her.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Just look at her.’

Every time I reach for the dishevelled Kizette, he somehow manages to move her just out of my reach with an effortless flick of his wrist.

‘What if you wake her up?’

‘I won’t. Will you just—’

‘Will you put her straight back afterwards?’

‘Rolant we don’t have time for this!’

‘Why?’

‘Someone could come in. Stop moving her away! Just let me—’

I make a daring snatch and manage to catch hold of her hair; ‘let go!’ I say, pulling.

‘She doesn’t like her hair touched! Did you know she doesn’t like her hair touched?’ he says, pulling back.

‘Let go Rolant! I just want to see her. I’m doing this to help you!’

‘Why?’

‘Stop pulling!’

‘Aren’t *you* pulling? Why are you helping?’

‘Because! Stop!’

‘Because why?’

‘You’re going to break—’

‘Because why?’

‘Because you’re my—’

There is a loud popping sound and something comes free in my hand as Rolant staggers back into the chest.

‘*Friend.*’

I slowly look down into my hands, already guessing what’s happened.

‘Did you wake her up?’

‘No,’ I say hopelessly, ‘I think we...’

‘Killed her?’ Rolant says, staring at the head in my hands.

I turn the grotesque head, revealing vacant glassy eyes. The straggly hair fans wildly around it like images of hungry ghosts in Chinese legends.

‘We’ve only pulled it off.’

Rolant stares at the limp body still in his grasp. ‘Why?’

'We can fix this,' I insist, heart racing.  
 'And wake her up?' Rolant says hopefully. 'Jesus woke up after three days.'  
 'Yes,' I nod, 'don't worry.'  
 'Are *you* worried?'  
 I glance at the adjoining door to the chapel; at any moment someone could come through it and witness what we have done.  
 'It probably just fits back on,' I say hastily, reaching for her body.  
 Rolant looks as though he might pull it away again but then dutifully passes it.  
 I begin attempting several techniques of pushing and turning in combination.  
 'Rolant, stand by the door! We don't want anyone coming in.'  
 'Is she resurrecting? Or will it take three days?'  
 'It's almost on.'  
 'What's wrong?'  
 'There's something blocking it.'  
 I feel around for the obstruction. Loose filling? Have we broken some mechanism for her eyes? I try to imagine how these shut-eye dolls work. But the blockage feels like something thin, something papery.  
 'What are you doing?'  
 'There's something in here.'  
 'Should you put your hand in other people?' says Rolant, trying to take her back.  
 'Stop! There's something inside. I've almost got it.'  
 My fingertips grip the paper and pull; a small, yellowing scroll shoots out onto the floor. Rolant uses the distraction to snatch Kizette back and immediately pops her head back into place.  
 'See?' I breathe with relief. 'There was just that old paper in the way.'  
 He walks back to the chest and tilts Kizette so that her eyes close once more.  
 'Is she sleeping again? Is she better now the paper is out?'  
 'I don't think she will miss it rattling inside her,' I tell him, retrieving the scroll. 'And we'd have to take her head off again to put it back.'  
 Rolant places her hastily back into the chest and closes it. 'Can we leave it out then?'  
 I place the sallow paper on the table and, weighting it with a teacup on one side, unravel it.  
 We both stare.  
 'Is it a clue?' says Rolant.  
 'Yes,' I say breathlessly. 'This is a clue! More than a clue.' I let out a small laugh in disbelief. 'This is *a map!*'  
 'A map of what?'  
 I trace the dull ink lines, the faded bird emblem underneath. Down one side runs a key, the various points on the map all identified in the same mysterious language as the objects in Walter's bedroom.  
 'Look at these points,' I say, 'bridges, railways, here's the viaduct and this one is... the chapel we're in right now!'  
 'What's that underneath?'  
 '*Tunnel?*' I read. 'Tunnel? The same in English?'  
 'There's a tunnel under the forest?'  
 'Yes. Look! It goes down to these circles. *Die höhle.*' I taste the foreign word in my mouth for a moment, mumbling it a few times, before: '*Höhle?* Holes? Are they holes?'

‘What’s that then?’ Rolant says suddenly, pointing inside one where a tiny word is scribbled: *karussell*.

‘Kara rassel? Car—’

‘Carousel?’

‘Carousel!’ I breathe. ‘Rolant, this is a map to your cave!’

He abruptly pulls his deerstalker down and marches to the door.

‘Where are you going?’ I ask, letting the map spiral closed again.

He says nothing but his hand slowly positions itself on the metal ring, waiting, as if for his name to be called.

‘Rolant, this is our proof! What we were looking for.’ I gather the map, and join him at the door. ‘We can show this to someone, have them ask Walter where he got it, where we can look for Elen.’

‘Is this where the policemen already looked?’ Rolant stares at the door, then seemingly through it. ‘Where... I left Elen? Where they didn’t believe the fox ghost made me run away? But you believe me, don’t you?’

I hesitate and he hangs his head.

‘In China,’ I say slowly, ‘they are called húli jīng. There are lots of stories about them taking people.’

‘Like the other ghosts Elen used to see in the forest? They were people...’

Rolant tells the floor. He glances up: ‘Do you still believe me?’

‘Rolant, I think we should show someone the map so they believe you too. The police may have searched Nyth Bran Chapel but, if there’s really a secret tunnel under it, they won’t have looked there.’

‘What about Elen? Did she know about it?’

‘I don’t know,’ I confess. ‘But you both knew how to reach the carousel without this map.’

‘We only knew the way through the forest, didn’t we? The girl ghost only showed Elen that way. But did the fox ghost take her another way? Under the chapel?’

‘Girl ghost?’ I repeat uneasily.

‘Sometimes. But sometimes it was the shouting men. Ghosts can change shape, can’t they? Do you believe me or not?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘Then we’ll find the secret tunnel?’

‘We can look but—’

‘*She* found it.’

‘We can’t know that,’ I say carefully but I feel guilty when I see his face turn abruptly away, the ears of his deerstalker drooping like a scolded hound. ‘Okay, Rolant, we can *look*. And if we find it, we get help. We shouldn’t go inside. The shadow in the cave...’

His eyes quickly meet mine. I sense his memory walking in underground passages, struggling alongside my own.

‘Don’t maps help you find things?’ he says.

‘Yes.’

‘Like Elen? Shouldn’t *we* try to find her? Because *we* have a map?’

‘We could go a little way in,’ I compromise reluctantly, ‘but only if it’s safe.’

‘Should we tell Kizette where we are going?’ Rolant asks as he swings open the door. ‘Will that make it safer? If someone knows where we are?’

I relent, pushing the map deep inside my pocket, wondering who would really believe us, and if they did, who would dare to follow us.

It is a full moon, clear and lidless, not one blink of cloud breaking its steady gaze across the valley. The crows have retreated to the tops of their trees, their occasional bickering penetrating the hollow moan of the wind.

I managed to convince Rolant that Minister Brychan would not approve of our poking around outside the chapel. I also explained, several times, why Minister Brychan also wouldn't agree to our disturbing any gravestones, even if one would make the perfect secret entrance for a tunnel. We then finally agreed to wait until evening, until the secrecy of darkness.

In the meantime, I tried to write another postcard to Ri. Yet I found there was nothing to say which would not betray some part of Rolant's secret, or the possible trouble we were getting ourselves into. Waiting, shivering at the chapel door, I can't help but fill with foreboding.

Something stirs between the trees, just beyond the gravestones. A flapping of wings, a distinct snapping of twigs. I search the stones of the chapel yard. Is it Rolant? Why hasn't he taken the path, followed the track up from the lane?

Unless, it isn't Rolant.

The night is suddenly too vague, blurring everything together beneath the glow of the moon. My thumb is ready on the torch's smooth switch, the sharp heavy handle. But I wait, quivering. Within the shelter of the chapel's arch, I am hidden. I silently will myself to become stone, a dead-eyed statue, watching, unblinking.

Then comes a different sound: a loud and unchecked footfall, thudding up the path, coming from the direction of the lane.

*Rolant.*

But as his footsteps land closer, and I sight the familiar bobbing shape of his walk cresting the path, a shadow too begins to rise from behind the wall. It is strange, thin and long, a line that lowers and straightens, elongates like the bending neck of the crane in Baba's folding book, preparing to drink deep from the river.

I recoil at the sight of the shotgun and something presses my heel, soft and square—a prayer cushion. Mr. 7AM must have returned it here after the service! Eyes still fixed on the gun, I sink, rigid and noiseless, as if lowering myself into icy water. On the cold flagstones, my fist secures the cushion and I rise with it, ready to aim.

Yet even as I hurl it high above the stones, even as it strikes true, I hear something else break and blast through the air. There is a shuddering fracture in the darkness, a rapid flash of Rolant and his hat falling sudden and prostrate, the simultaneous whip of my voice still cracking his name.

My cry is at once echoed by another: the high shriek of the fox, resonating from the forest. I stagger back, as if struck by it, watching as the trees ahead tremble with the clamour of crows taking flight. I see them rapidly descend, a frantic tangle, dropping in a terrible mass from the waving nibs of their treetops. They then rise up together, a black pillar momentarily eclipsing the moon and all its light, swallowed, then released.

They descend again and, like a cloud of angry arrows protecting the fortress of their nests, they fall upon the wall. Something within the mesh of wings shrieks, retreating. The gun explodes a second time, the world flashes loud and white again, before plunging back into darkness.

Ears ringing, I desperately search for the shape of Rolant. Squinting, I think I see him, very still on the ground, exactly where he fell. I call to him, but the sound is lost, imperceptible from the sound of the crows, still diving and pursuing something into the forest.

Clinging to the walls of the chapel with both hands, shapes of crows appear as echoes of light still dancing before my pupils. I manage to steady myself, forcing my eyes to focus but finding everything is still moving. Everything moves but Rolant.

I blink hard and he still lies there, stretched still as driftwood on the black shore of the path.

‘Rolant!’ I cry out again.

No answer.

I race forwards, immediately stumbling, tripping and scraping my knee. I stagger back upright, eyes smarting, hurrying on towards him. Then crouching down beside him, I reach out one trembling hand. But I am too afraid to roll him over, too afraid to see if his eyes are empty.

My hand closes softly around his hat instead, still dully warm.

‘*Rolant.*’

He stirs. Slowly and slightly, the head lifts without turning. ‘I...’

I almost scream, this time with joy, clenching his hat to my mouth to stifle it. ‘Are you hurt? Can you get up?’

‘I... don’t like fireworks,’ he manages.

I let out a shaky gasp. ‘It didn’t hit you then?’

‘What? What was supposed to hit me?’

I immediately glance over at the wall, ‘get up, quickly!’

‘What was supposed to hit me?’ he demands, still facing the ground.

‘There was someone over by that wall,’ I say quickly, ‘we should go.’

‘Did they have sparklers? Were they wearing gloves? You have to wear gloves when you use sparklers, don’t you?’

‘No they didn’t, they—’

‘Have they gone to get gloves? And a bucket to put out the—’

‘They had a *gun* Rolant!’ I hiss, watching him bolt immediately upright. ‘And they could be back. What’s the quickest way back to your farm?’

‘Which way did they go?’

‘It doesn’t matter now.’ I rub my eyes, trying to think evenly over the ringing in my ears. ‘Just how do we get back *fast*? The lanes? The fields?’

He takes his deerstalker from me and pulls it on, looking over at the wall, where his would-be killer waited. ‘Which way did they go?’

‘Rolant, there’s no time!’ I beg him. ‘Just show me the way before they come back!’

But without looking from the wall, he points ahead, his finger tracing the exact line where the last of the crows can be heard, cawing faintly into the night.

I exhale. ‘But that’s...’

‘Are they going the quickest way? Through the forest and then Gethin’s fields? To Dyffryn Tŷ?’

‘But you came *that* way,’ I say, pointing towards the road.

‘I don’t like cows, do I?’ he says simply. He pulls his hat down a little further on his head and then looks at me properly, for the first time since he has risen awkwardly from the floor. ‘Or fireworks.’

Somewhere beyond the wall a fox barks, high and short, close.

‘Or ghosts,’ he adds hastily.

‘Let’s go!’

‘Not through fields with cows in? Or the forest?’

‘It won’t be safe to go back to Dyffryn Tŷ anyway,’ I say. ‘At least not until we know who...’

The fox cries nearby.



‘Shall we hide in the chapel?’ says Rolant, already running up the path towards the door.

His hand on the heavy metal ring, I ask: ‘How do you know it’s o—?’

He swings it immediately open.

‘Why would a church have locks?’ Rolant asks. ‘Are locking doors only for bathrooms and when you’re getting changed?’

‘If we can’t lock it,’ I say, thinking rapidly, ‘we shouldn’t corner ourselves in there.’

‘Don’t we have the map?’ he says, as though this makes us impervious. ‘So we can find the secret tunnel and go back that way?’

‘And if *they* come back first?’

‘They will come back, won’t they?’

‘What?’ I press inside and he closes the door with a low thud. ‘Why?’

‘To apologise,’ says Rolant simply, pulling down the sleeve of his coat to reveal the scorch mark in the fabric beneath, the shallow wound in his shoulder, and how the dark blood has run like a red web down his arm.

\*

A life is as one lonely lantern, smouldering amber, flickering upon a floating board. The slow undercurrent of the world draws its tiny light downstream. Steadily the flame inside cracks and curls this lantern into ash. And the shadow of its hungry ghost follows as it disappears beneath the surface.

Each year, a lotus-shaped lantern glides the river, guiding Baba down. And when its flame extinguishes, his ghost returns below the world. He sinks once more, beneath the surface. He descends as he did into the mines.

I think I feel his touch, a hand black and closed around mine. Baba is at my side, his scorched clothes whispering as we walk, wearing the spark freckles, the gloves hardened by fire.

‘Home?’ I ask him.

Every time I must ask him this.

His boots grind a loose stone, ‘*no*.’

And here is the strange air I can touch. It settles on my skin like a fine powder, drying my hair into desiccated straw. This air knows how to taste me, make the blood-metal sing in my mouth.

‘Where then, Baba?’

White noise, static, pops in the concrete towers.

‘To the dragon,’ the glove’s fingers fold like a talon, ‘to feed the dragon.’

A haze sifts our bodies through shapeless blocks, a tunnel of eyeless grey buildings.

‘What does he eat Baba?’

‘Steel,’ he says. ‘Men and steel.’

He pulls the cap low on his dark forehead. Pain seems to flicker, ignite a glimpse of his gritted teeth. I hear the wheezing flicker in his chest.

‘*Don’t take me there Baba...*’

He coughs, and coughs. I cover my ears to stop the sound: the static and the ringing of machines; grinding and coughing; the churning and hissing; the coughing.

The gloves suddenly pull me in, gripping me, coarse as gravel, the dead hold of a vice. I am clamped tight by tiny bird shoulders, lifted high, folded silently against him.

‘Be still,’ says Baba, ‘be calm.’

Together we pass beneath the long shadow of a building's cabled ceiling, my tears carried close to his neck. Here, the coins are counted. I feel the vibration of them passing like electricity through his hand.

'Gas explosion...' someone spits through the static, 'six swallowed whole.'

'Six?' Breath catches, collapses into coughing again.

'Six, six-hundred; what does it matter? We are a smoke that passes.'

'Before our children's eyes?'

'You talk like a scholar,' the voice sneers, 'with a scholar's hollow head. Do not bring *her* again. Mine alone; collect pay alone. While this earth dragon still rumbles with coal, you are miner and die as one. Yǎnlèi jiù bù liǎo huǒ!'

*Tears cannot put out a fire.*

\*

The map lies unfurled in the moonlight, a pale beam cast on the altar. I lean my head against the cool stone of the chapel wall, eyes closed.

'What are you doing?'

'Thinking,' I mumble.

His voice, and the world it belongs to, seem remote somehow, a distant place beyond the heaviness.

'What are you thinking about?' he persists.

'What we're going to do. Why won't you let me look at your shoulder?'

'It feels like stinging nettles,' he says after a long period of consideration.

'Should we find dock leaves to put on it? Then find the tunnel?'

'It is much worse than nettles! You need to go to a hospital and not down a tunnel, even if we do find—'

'Or get dock leaves? Should we go out and get dock leaves?'

'No!' I try to level my voice, facing away from him. 'We shouldn't go outside. Not yet. We don't know if it's safe. But if we don't stop the bleeding, that won't matter!'

The gunshot is still singing in my ears, my mind replaying him falling, lying motionless. And my blood suddenly races, readying for the chapel door to spring open. I find myself turning quickly, spinning against the wall, clumsily, as if my arm has suddenly been shot too.

'That person out there *tried to shoot you!*' I tell him. 'Don't you understand what that means?'

'Tried? So they didn't really shoot me? Why does my arm feel like nettles then?'

'If they shot you Rolant, your arm would be gone! And they could still find us! So let me see your shoulder then concentrate on finding a way back to the village.' I look around the shadowy chapel. 'This was a mistake Rolant. We can't risk the caves again... or Dyffryn Tŷ. That leaves the village. If we can get back safely, we'll get the police.'

'Why?'

'Because someone tried to kill you!'

The word 'kill' seems to startle us both, shocking us both upright and alert again. He suddenly steps closer to me, his breath unfurling in the moonlight.

'Do you know how to put on bandages?'

I flush, burning at the sight of the blood, the abrupt reality: 'Sorry, no.'

I now see his eyes are swollen; he has been crying the whole time.

'They know how to put on bandages at Dyffryn Tŷ, don't they?'

'I don't think we should go there,' I tell him, swallowing hard. The ringing from the gunshots is gradually being replaced by a low, hollow drumming. Everything is slowing, while we stand motionless, powerless to do anything.

I snatch Rolant's hand, feel the blood sliding like silk down my wrist. He doesn't pull away.

'Promise me you're not going to die,' I say, gripping the hand. I become locked in his even stare, desperately reaching inside it for some sign of understanding: 'This is real Rolant. You have to tell me if you start to feel...'

'What does dying feel like?' he asks, reaching back into my gaze.

His focus becomes scrutinizing as a microscope, magnifying the chaos within me, parting the lantern smoke, sifting ashes, suddenly knowing the ghostly stillness of Baba's lidless stare. I feel him examining my loss, turning it in his bloodied hand, considering its relative weight and dimensions.

I try to pull away but I find he is holding on.

'Is it when you have to stop suddenly? Like *this*—'

He unexpectedly grips me hard with both hands.

'What?' I struggle against him.

'Mr. 7AM said it's when you stop like this. Is it?'

'I don't know.'

'If someone falls over in front of the train,' he says, his grip loosening, 'they *emergency stop*, don't they? That means stopping really fast. Is that how it feels? Like emergency stopping? And then you're not allowed to get out of your seat or leave because the doors are all locked? But my arm hasn't stopped, has it?' he insists rapidly. 'It just feels like stinging nettles? So we can still find the tunnel and Elen?' He slumps onto a pew, suddenly drained, his hand on his shoulder. '*Elen*.'

I sit down next to him. 'I'm sorry,' I say softly. 'We'll stay here for now. Only, your arm...' I eye the dark stain across his shoulder. 'I don't know what to do about that.'

'We could use the first-aid kit over there?'

He indicates the small box, innocently attached to the wall behind the rood screen.

'Can I put the bandages on? Because you don't know how? And because I've seen how to do it before? And I remember things that I see? Like when Martin put a badge through his nipple and needed first-aid?'

I race over, prise the box from the wall, and remove gauze and bandages. Rolant comes and kneels beside me, taking off his coat. I gently lift the wet collar of his shirt and he winces.

'Sorry,' I say, lightly placing the gauze, watching it saturate and darken. 'Tell me if you do feel like... emergency stopping.'

'I feel like going to bed,' Rolant says, longingly.

'Stay awake!' I say, watching him droop and I begin securing the gauze in place.

'Why's it getting darker?' he says, looking around the shadowy chapel.

'Hold still,' I tell him, 'almost done! Stay awake. Here, look at this instead—,' I get up and pass him the map: 'focus on finding that tunnel.'

'If I find it, can we use it to get back? *And* find Elen?'

'That will have to do,' I say, sitting back to look at my clumsy work.

Suddenly there is a noise outside. Somewhere on the other side of the high windows, we listen to the footsteps.

'They've come back!' I hiss, closing the kit, sliding it under the pew.

Rolant struggles with his coat, lopsidedly turning in circles.

‘Are they going to shoot me again? Because I didn’t like—’  
‘Shhh!’ I crouch low, pulling him down by his flapping sleeve. ‘*Quiet!* We need to hide.’

‘Where?’

I look down the long shadowy aisles, like black trenches through the chapel, and imagine us trying to hold off the rounds of gunfire with nothing more than prayer cushions.

The footsteps grow nearer, running along the outside wall, light and fast like a rat.

‘There’s no time!’

Something is turning the large metal door ring, the sounds of its latch grating, lifting.

Suddenly I feel Rolant’s hand on my wrist, gripping it the way he did moments before. ‘Should we hide in this tunnel?’ he says, pointing at the map with the other.

And before I can stop him, he is pulling us both through the aisle, hurrying us past the screen.

I can hear the scrape of the heavy door swinging slowly open behind us as we approach the altar. Rolant directs us underneath. We drop narrowly beneath the embroidered cloth, Rolant pulling it back down behind us, stilling the swaying folds at once with his fingertips. He then shoulders in, inching us uncomfortably backwards on the sharp stonework.

There is a small sliver of light, a gap in the corner of the cloth, and I press my eye to it, hand on mouth to silence my breathing.

But there is something else, illuminated by the shard of light. Rolant’s breath is at my cheek, his finger slowly indicates—*look*. Scratched deep in the stone above us is the small but unmistakable symbol: a scribbled spider, stirring in the half light, its legs seeming to mirror the movements of the unknown shadow slowly entering the chapel, travelling along the chapel’s back pew.

I bite the sleeve of my coat, staring into the dread shape of a swastika. My eyes dart from it, to the figure at the back of the chapel, and then back again.

Rolant shifts next to me.

Something glints, catches the moonlight as the shadow slinks into the back pew. It only takes another moment for me to recognise the long slender shape, riding black and high, tall as a bayonet.

‘What can you see?’ Rolant hisses into my ear.

I shake my head once and slowly, jaw locked tight, watching the bobbing shotgun.

The shape continues to follow the periphery of the chapel, guarded by the gloom. I strain my eyes, willing the moon to reveal everything, if only for a moment. But little by little the intruder is obscured behind pillars, and then entirely. We listen to the sound of another door opening and then closing.

‘Have they gone for elevenses in the vestry? Should we escape? Before they come back?’ whispers Rolant.

‘No. They’re still here; they’ll see us.’

He shifts again, this time pushing my foot. And again. Until I realise that he is doing it intentionally.

‘Should we escape down *there*?’ he says.

And I immediately realise why the floor has felt so sharp. As I adjust, the shard of light falls on the rusting metal slats of a large, circular grate.

Thoughts racing, I pull the torch from my coat pocket, angling it carefully downwards so that no light will escape and give us away. Clicking it once, the dim light strikes straight through the grate, illuminating a concrete slab, just a drain.

But Rolant moves my hand across, and as I point the beam, I find the edge of another slab much deeper, its corner barely visible but for the light—steps?

Rolant's hand appears at the edge of the glow, holding the map out and pointing. His finger indicates the word beneath the tiny chapel: *tunnel*.

I nod to show I understand and click the torch off.

When I wind my fingers around the grate, it seems firm at first, locked in place. Yet with Rolant lifting equally on the other side, we are able to pull it up and slide it partly across, quietly creating a gap just large enough to slip through.

But before we have time to move, we hear the sound of the vestry door again, footsteps re-entering. I quickly lean into the gap in the cloth, seeing the ghost floating high and white, a silhouette flitting up and down against the far window—no—attached to something. The figure has returned bringing this thing strung up upon their gun like some eerie trophy, making it bob up and down, up and down like a savage head on a pike. This strange procession comes towards us, heading straight for the altar. I glance at Rolant and find he is already positioning himself to enter into the passage below.

'Go!'

He slips downwards and I twist my own feet into place as soon as his head disappears. I feel him hastily take hold of them from below, angling them onto whatever footing lies beneath. He pulls again and I inch downwards but not before stealing one last look.

The thing attached to the gun catches for a moment in the moonlight, just as I slip down. Kizette's eyes meet mine, as though she has looked right through the shadows, the veiling fabric, the very stone, and caught me hiding there.

In the passage below, Rolant is already waiting a few steps down, his face expectant, eyes large when I find them with the torch.

'Should we hurry?' he says, taking my arm.

The steps steadily spiral below, deeper and deeper. My breath grows quick and shallow and soon I cannot guess how many steps we have taken, how many minutes or even hours we have been going. I know only the ache in my legs, my back, and the danger propelling us forwards like rabbits into the earth.

Eventually the steps begin to plateau, growing longer and flatter apart. I find myself having to stretch my pace, extend the light further and further ahead of Rolant, until the steps stop completely and we are walking the level floor of a low tunnel.

The shadowy mouths of subsidiary tunnels begin to appear on both sides. Rolant turns us down several and I follow him dumbly, thinking only of losing whoever is behind us. Whether we will become lost ourselves, is a future I don't dare imagine. There can only be our quick pace onwards, the stretching of the dim amber glow, the cool dry air. There can only be the heavy breathing of now.

Then something begins to stir in the path ahead, stopping us both still. At first a noiseless grey gas, it begins lifting and turning through the wall, as though from the nostrils of some sleeping dragon. It coils up and in front of us, showing how the tunnel is broader there, opening steadily wider.

And then a sound: the dull sound of men distantly shouting.

Faint at first, it seems to come from the very rock itself, escaping with the twisting smoke. The voices are low and indistinct, the words foreign, mixing steadily with something else... the void pop and crackle of static.

I take Rolant's arm, meaning to pull him back the way we have come, but even as I try to reach him, the figure materialises in a deafening roar of white noise.

'NEIN!' it bellows, the force swinging Rolant like a feeble door, back and against the opposite wall.

And the gas races up, coils and separates into the high boots, the broad rigid torso, two ghostly arms. A square back lunges forwards. The severe gaunt features of a face appear, black and lidless beneath the brow of a hat.

Still rooted in the centre of the tunnel, I watch as the uniformed figure turns to me. It looks through me and screams a mouthful of white noise, a piercing blast of whining and popping, as though the voice is trapped and locked between two channels, echoing through the torch's radiance.

And the soldier starts running, the gash of his mouth enveloped in a writhing smoke, an ear-splitting cry forcing me to cover my ears with both hands. I find I am screaming back as he runs towards me, his head low and with the curling outline of a pistol gripped in one gloved hand. Electricity spreads and races through me, my hairs prickling and immediately erect, a rush of stinging across my body. I see the empty sockets of his eyes, feel myself violently jolt, as they align and meet mine in a terrible symmetry, and then pass right through. I stagger, falling forwards, the torch barrelling away from me. Light oscillates, spinning and spinning.

Then only breathing, my face against the icy stone floor.

The weighty torch continues to spin at my ear, glinting and flashing like a search light through the dark. Around and around it goes until it stops short, as though gripped by some unknown force. Its beam shoots immediately lengthways, lighting up an almond-shaped fissure, no larger than a footprint, level with the ground.

Blood pounds hard in my head as I stare through, deep into the rock where something is gleaming, calling. Shapes form, lighting and flickering like flares in the space within.

There, through the rock's serrated teeth, a different world is burning hot: a world of fire and gold. The amber treasure trove winks through a veil of strange smoke, rising and falling like the very breath of some hidden guardian.

\*

'Miao?' a voice is saying, 'Miao? Are you awake now?'

'Rolant...' but my voice trails away like the smoke.

I hear him slump down next to me, feel the pressure of him falling against my side. 'Am I awake?' he asks.

I slip into the lengthy silence, in and out of emptiness. I dully remember someone is following, consider that they could find us soon, but that world seems faint, false. There are only the endless passageways, reaching below and above us, twisting tightly like noodles tangled in a bowl.

'Did you see the shouting man too?' Rolant is saying. 'Is that why you tripped over?'

The beam of the torch strikes my eyelids and I slowly open them.

'Did you see him?' he persists.

'Yes, I think so.'

I run my sleeve across my aching eyes.

'But has he gone now? Can you stop tripping over? Or are you resting?'

I slowly raise myself from the ground, hand shaking and feeling for the wall. The light quivers unsteadily as it travels to illuminate Rolant's face, revealing that it is veiled in a thick layer of ash.

‘You’re covered in grey.’

‘So are you,’ he says. ‘Are we ghosts now?’

‘No?’

‘But the shouting man was a ghost, wasn’t he? Ghosts are grey. And they wear funny clothes like the people in the photographs? Like the photographs Walter has? The ones on his bedroom wall?’

My heart quickens, recalling Kizette’s lidless gaze as she approached our hiding place beneath the altar. ‘We have to get out of here Rolant.’

‘All the ghosts in those photographs are grey. And some wore the funny spider clothes too. Why do ghosts wear spiders on their clothes?’

‘Spiders?’ I repeat, then slowly realising what he means: ‘Swastikas? Like the shape on the altar? You mean, they’re all...’

‘Fashionable?’

‘No,’ I say and my mind is racing as the pieces slot neatly together like bars on a window. ‘If they all have the symbol from the altar then they’re—’

‘But Dafina has magazines for making collages and she says the pictures in them tell people how to wear the same thing. Wearing the same thing means *fashionable*, doesn’t it?’

‘No, it’s a uniform Rolant,’ I breathe slowly. ‘It’s different. They’re all soldiers.’ I swallow hard. ‘Nazi soldiers.’

The torchlight remains on his passive grey face just below the chin, the dark deep sockets of his eyes flickering as he blinks back at me.

‘We should go.’

I unfold the map, taking the torch and running it across the furrows of its creased surface as Rolant takes up the other side. The tiny inked veins of the tunnel systems seem endless as I follow them faster and faster, blinking at dead ends and foreign words I can’t decipher.

‘We’ve turned down so many of these tunnels. We could be anywhere on this side! We don’t have any clear markers, any way of knowing—’

I stop, my mouth still open; I all but forgot. Slowly, I let go of my side of the map and it flutters down, droops limply in Rolant’s grasp. Squatting, one hand tracing the wall, I find the almond-shaped gap again. This *has* to be part of the map, part of everything.

‘In there,’ I say. ‘We have to get in there... where *he* came from.’

Rolant crouches down, pressing in so our heads are touching as we stare into the flickers of gold.

‘What is it?’ he asks. ‘Did you find treasure? Was this a treasure map?’

I start to feel heavy, sick, as a thought forms.

‘What kind of treasure,’ I say, ‘would Nazis be hiding down here?’

‘He was running away from the treasure,’ says Rolant. ‘Didn’t he want it anymore? Is it dangerous? Is there a dragon guarding it?’

‘W-why would you say that?’ I say, trying not to think of Baba, trying not to think of all those inked map lines spiralling down into nowhere.

‘*Dragon’s Teeth Cave*,’ he recites.

I blink hard and put my hand out, testing the rock. ‘It’s soft here, like clay around the gap,’ I say hopefully. ‘Maybe we can knock through to the other inside.’

‘Should we not go in? In case there is a dragon?’

‘It’s some kind of cavern, like the one with the carousel. Some of the caverns are marked on the map; we could find a marker,’ I pause and try to sound confident: ‘a way out.’

Rolant pauses for a moment and watches as I press my weight against the wall. Then, folding up the map and tucking it under his hat, he begins doing the same with his good shoulder. The wall immediately begins to give. Pieces around the gap show cracks veining outwards, edges steadily crumbling into debris.

‘We’ll have to be careful it doesn’t collapse on us,’ I say, eyeing the rock above.

With a loud crack, a large piece comes away. We manage to shift it, covering our mouths and pulling more pieces out into the tunnel, until we have cleared the opening enough to crawl through.

I go first, giving Rolant the torch. He holds the light through a corner piece as I shift sideways to crawl inside. He pushes my feet and I slide through quite easily, coughing in the dry air. I reach back for the light, hold it in one hand as I pull him through with the other.

Catching his breath, he sits up abruptly, his deerstalker lopsided and covering his eyes. Adjusting it, he looks around.

‘It is treasure!’ he says.

I look up to find that the light is shining on something reflective—gold.

Getting to our feet, I take the light closer, walking over to the small space where something bright shines. Running my hand across the wall, the ash starts to fall away, revealing a glowing mosaic of different ambers. I gently stroke a small area and it crumbles to reveal the golden relief work, glinting through like a ray of sunlight.

‘What is this place?’ I breathe.

But Rolant suddenly grips my arm, ‘what’s that noise?’

I immediately tense and listen, only to hear it too: a slow, steady tap.

‘Where?’ I mouth uneasily.

Rolant points and I shine the light across to find a narrow opening into another cavern. As we continue to listen, I realise that the sound is steady, unchanging.

We follow it into the next cavern. The air grows thicker with spiralling dust clouds. They slowly turn around us, becoming a strange churning mist. We continue through and I begin to realise that the sound is entirely rhythmic, automatic.

‘It’s something here.’ Stepping to the opposite wall, the light travels a curved shape. I reach out and I hear Rolant gasp behind me. ‘*What?*’ I hiss.

‘Is it a bomb?’ he says. ‘What if it’s a bomb? Don’t touch it, if it’s a bomb.’

I reach out again and wipe away the layer of grey powder, feeling cool glass beneath. And the torchlight illuminates the edge of an amber clock. I wipe away more and reveal its face, its fine golden hands, the inlaid roman numerals.

‘This can’t be right...’ I think aloud, listening to its rhythmic ticking.

‘Is the time wrong?’ says Rolant. ‘Have the batteries run out?’

‘That’s what I mean,’ I say hesitantly, because another sound is slowly drifting into the cavern, ‘this clock is so old, you’d have to *wind it*.’

‘Who’s been winding it up then?’ whispers Rolant. ‘Can ghosts wind clocks? Was that why the ghost was running? Was he late because—’

‘Sh! Listen!’ I say sharply because now I am certain of the other sound. ‘Do you hear that? *Listen*.’

Somewhere through the dust and dark, a high tinkling melody is resonating. The strangeness of hearing music, anything, down here sends a chill through me.

Rolant immediately straightens. ‘That song...’ he says.

‘What is it?’ I whisper, following his gaze, fixed in the direction of the faint music. ‘You recognise it?’

‘Za-uber-flo-et-e. *The Magic Flute*. It’s the name of the song, isn’t it?’



‘You’ve heard it before?’

‘It’s the name written on the bottom of the box,’ he says quietly, almost to himself now. ‘The music box in Ben’s room. It’s the music box Elen likes to play with.’

‘Music boxes need winding too,’ I say, quickly dropping the torchlight to the ground. I lower my voice even more: ‘*There’s someone here.*’

‘Is it Elen?’

His eyes are hopeful, shining like the amber. I look into them, listening to the naive metallic music, slowly realising the nature of this place. Should we find the child who came wandering here years before, we must find her as all things here, in this dragon’s lair: something time has taken; hidden and hewn into part of the rock; concealed in hoarded amber, veiled in preserving powders. All here remains unmoving, unchanged, except for the creature that guards the pieces, the hand that winds the key. *That ancient serpent, who is called the devil, the deceiver of the whole world...*

I look around for another passage, another explanation, but guess we have stumbled into the vault of someone’s sleeping treasures.

‘It’s a trap,’ I whisper. ‘Don’t follow the music Rolant, it’s a trap.’

But even as I speak, he is stepping forwards, as though mesmerised by the soft repetition of that tune: the dark, deliberate call of The Magic Flute.

\*

‘Oi! Quit that Bomper game. I got something far better!’ echoes a girl’s voice. The voice of another girl: ‘And lose my taw?’

‘T’others are playing at Queenie and they want you in!’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you. Come on Dilys; leave Wally-Walter to it. Here’s your chance to play with the older girls!’

‘But Rhosyn that’s the red marble I just barely got down the shops.’

‘Play ‘im for it after. We needing one more at a better game, see?’

‘Can’t just quit Bomper; Walter’ll make off with my taw!’

‘Wally-Walter? Ha! Look at him over there, still playing coggy-handed! Just tell Dyffryn Tŷ he stole it and they’ll send it right back to you.’

‘But Craddock’ll whip h—’

‘Well there you are then! Only what he deserves. Now let’s go! Isn’t cobbing ball with us better than marbles with twp old Walter?’

‘Oh, all right!’ The girl’s voice rises momentarily: ‘*Oi Walter! Might as well head back to Dyffryn Tŷ; I’m going to play Queenie Ball with Rhosyn for a bit...* Where we playing then? The lane?’

‘Crythor Forest, just left of the tump. And don’t you worry; I’ve pitched a tale to the old-uns that we all there chopping sticks, only on the edge like. *Safe as houses* we all said... and they swallowed it!’

‘How many there to play?’

‘Five with you but I’m sure there’s another player to be, somewhere.’

‘Who they picked for Queenie then?’

‘Uh...’

‘I won’t be Queenie if that’s what you’re after, Rhosyn? Right, I’m gone then!’

‘Come on, Dilys!’

‘Wfft! None wants to be the Queenie!’

‘Well we’ll have to find one sharpish if we’re going to play *Queenie* Ball. You go tell your Da’ you’re off.’

‘No... ‘e sleepin’ off the drink. Besides, I’m not going if I’m to be Queenie. Rather stay here with Wally-Walter. Least he knows I’m boss at marbles and doesn’t think me twp.’

‘We don’t!’

‘Why you here getting me for the Queenie then? You all think I’m twp, just like Wally-Walter!’

‘No, w—hold on! What about Walter? Let *him* be Queenie! The older girls will pass remarks but better Wally-Walter’s the one to be pulled to pieces; it’s my neck if I come back with naught!’

‘You’ll never get him to play.’

‘Well, I’m not parading back and forth through them nasty trees, dodgin’ swallow holes, trying to find anyone else now!’

‘But—’

‘Eisht! If you don’t want to be Queenie, you’d best help talk Wally-Walter into it. That or there’s no game to be had. Wantin’ the older girls callin’ you twp forever is it?’

‘I thought you said—’

‘Oh, jack-it-in you! Call that sledge over; help me talk ‘im round.’

‘All right. *Oi, Walter, you coming or no?*’

‘And look: here the lump comes in his ugly great clod-hoppers! Lookin’ at ‘im now, I don’t credit he can aim a ball straight.’

‘No...’

‘*Oi, Walter! Forget that stupid doll, will you? You’ll be needing both hands for Queenie—oi! Come back! Fine, bring the doll Walter!* But just see that you don’t fell my ball down the cave. Got my Da’ believin’ we’re not further than Crythor’s fence posts. Will ‘ave ‘is ‘air off if he has to go down some hole for my ball!’

‘The older girls better not send *me* on after any fell ball! I’m not going down there, knocking ‘bout with fairy folk!’

‘Fairies? Now you *do* sound twp Dilys! You’d be knocking ‘bout with none but the dark down th—’

‘*Oh, there are other things... lovely things Kizette and I could show you...*’

White noise surges, crackling and popping tiny electric stars in the gloom. A sigh rattles, like the breath of some corroded organ, air sucking in and out, in and out through scaled spaces. A rhythmic chant drones slowly through, meeting rusted clinks. Murmurs sound along the tunnels, sparks of noise playing through the solid rock. Words echo, hollow as caves, dripping and cold, voices gradually worn false and flat in time:

*Queenie, Queenie who's got the ball? Are they short, or are they tall?*

The words intertwine a metallic music. A frail disharmony meanders and merges, echoing and repeating back.

*Are they hairy, HAIRY or are they bald, BALD—*

An abrupt silence. Nothing but the wind, scouring empty passages.

‘*You don't know,*’ whispers a lone voice, ‘*because you don't have the ball...*’

\*

‘Did you hear that?’ I hiss to Rolant.

He doesn’t answer, stepping low through the jagged opening ahead. I hurry after him, shining the torch through the fabric of my coat so as to keep it as discreet and dull as possible. And all around us I think I hear strange quavering voices singing, something about a game, something lost. And was there a name? *Dilys...* the name Owen talked about?

*Loose go, loose go!*

I turn, whipping the light up: nothing but rock.

‘R-Rolant, can you—’

But he is still pressing forwards, seemingly indifferent to the other growing voices around us. He seems only to hear the tinkling music, luring him onwards.

I replace the heavy torch inside my coat, feeling the handle cold and hard against my heartbeat. Whatever I can hear, this light can’t reveal it.

*No looks on it now...*

My own voice catches in my throat.

*Just leave go!*

I almost step straight into Rolant.

*I know for your ball.*

I manage to catch his arm but he only pulls me on like a strange tide. My face grows hot, my hair damp with sweat. A strange electric humming steadily begins to vibrate. The walls gradually blur and quiver with ripples of heat. I shake my head, feeling as though my very thoughts are rattling, bouncing like glass beads in a jar. Ahead, little embers are popping and twisting in the ripples, violently humming and shaking downwards in spirals.

Rolant is still pulling me on, towards a music I can no longer hear and likely he cannot hear either. I put a hand out to steady us and find the rock is warm like slabs left in midday sun. Pulling my hand back, I gasp because it’s popping and crackling too. Gold threads glow, lacing my fingertips, forming glittering webs momentarily before fading and petering out.

*Queenie, Queenie who's got the ball?*

I wipe my dripping forehead with the back of my sleeve, breath quick and shallow. I feel the clammy dust prickle, congealing into a pasted mask across stinging eyes. My throat aches for water.

Then the tunnel opens and we are staggering into a low cavern, heat immediately striking our faces as though bursting from an unseen oven.

‘Th-The music,’ I rasp, hearing it return unexpectedly above the humming.

And we are no longer alone.

The glow through my coat is illuminating a figure against the opposite wall. It stirs, purposefully, as we enter.

‘Elen?’ I hear Rolant say.

The figure slides from the wall, slick and serpent-like.

*Are they short, or are they tall?*

It straightens. The diamond head is crested either side of two huge eyes. A long, cylindrical jaw reaches down past the smooth chest, inflexible and glistening. The barbed elbows jut out. Sheathed talons grip the tiny music box.

We stand transfixed in silence, hardly breathing, the tiny figure of the revolving girl, a fractured ballerina, the only thing stirring between us in the lines of heat. The figure seems to hold her out to us, just out of reach. I strain to see against the darkness, slowly retrieving pieces, a steady jigsaw of materials: the gloss of rubber, the cylinders of metal, the reflective eyes of glass.

*Are they hairy, or are they bald?*

‘It’s a suit,’ I realise slowly, ‘a gasmask.’

‘Where is she? Where’s Elen?’ Rolant shouts at the figure.

The tinny music slows, the ballerina shudders as she turns.

‘Where is SHE!’ he roars, and I feel the muscle contract in his arm, large and powerful, no longer concealed in their gentle clothes.

My own body, small and shaking, shrinks from the solidness of this figure, from the hand that winds the pieces. I look on in dread as that hand reaches into the box, lifting something carefully from it. The curved form glints once in the glow from our torchlight: more metal, a sphere.

‘Vermin!’ a deep voice hisses out like gravel, a shower of venomous shrapnel from the mask. And the hand lifts the sphere high.

*You don't know because...*

‘You don't have the ball,’ I find my own voice finishing for the voices slowly, feeling the breath of something at my neck, hearing a little girl's voice, urgent, suddenly at my ear:

*Queenie, Queenie! Who's got the ball?*

‘Rolant! Quick!’ I shout, pulling him aside, sending us both into the opposite wall. As we fall, the ball soars up and past us through the air, spinning like a dancer, something spilling, billowing up out of it. ‘GAS!’

I wrestle with Rolant's flailing arms on the ground, taking them in my own, the shadowy outlines of others joining them, helping me heave him up, pulling us both up through the heat.

‘Look out!’ he suddenly exclaims.

Something seizes my shoulder, clamping me hard, pulling me from him. There is a hissing at our feet, something rising.

‘No!’ I cry, wielding the heavy torch from its sheath, striking out with beams of light into the mounting amber smoke.

I hear the crack of glass, and a guttural shriek of rage—a woman's—from within the monstrous mask. Chest tightening, I swing a second time and the light illuminates the figure against the dark for a moment: an ink black silhouette with arms up across the face to shield the beam, amber smoke spreading behind like two deadly great wings. And there are things at its feet, twitching and jerking, shadowy bodies convulsing in the smoke, the arch of swirling spines going into spasms, bodies in yellowing uniforms convulsing and curling up like old leaves, blowing away into ash, chased away by time.

I turn, nose streaming as I stagger and choke sideways, strike the wall, coughing and retching, feeling for Rolant with one hand and swinging the beam with the other like a searchlight.

But I find only vague shapes dancing in and out of the light, wispy creatures spiralling, as though fleeing, out through a narrow opening in the wall ahead. A dim swarm of ghostly yellow bats, hum and descend, a churning vapour, out through the opening. A corkscrew of dancing amber foxes scream as they go. Then suddenly I see the pale outline of two girls in dresses holding hands, running. One is choking, collapsing, folds and vanishes just as she reaches the opening. The other stops and turns, faces me, revealing the wraithlike outline of her gasmask. I falter at the sight of the great opaque eyeholes, the flaccid tubes resting at the little Peter Pan collar. But I see she has stopped for me, to point: *this way*.

I dizzily stumble towards the opening, the burning in my eyes and throat growing unbearable. I try to call out for Rolant but only manage a gurgling noise, before collapsing forwards through the opening.

Fresh, cool air rushes immediately into my lungs and I crawl instinctively into it, coughing and finally vomiting. Clawing forwards, I manage to roll onto my side, try to look back, reach back for Rolant, try to call out for him.

Instead, I see only the faint outline of the girl. She is kneeling at a pile of stones. I want to tell her to go back, to find Rolant in the smoke, but I can only cough and cough.

When she eventually turns to me, there is only shadow in her face, mere suggestions of features made by fine, moving cobweb-like lines. The mask is gone—no—it's there, resting on the pile of stones. Only now it is firm, fixed, *real*. I can see the dark buckled straps, the peeling rubber, the metal tubing, the large crack in the left eye lens. It rests there on the grave.

*So you didn't make it out of here either*, I tell her in my thoughts. *I'm sorry... Elen.*

And her form slowly flickers, then gradually extinguishes into an ashen gloom as though she were, as though it all were, no more than a lotus lantern's flame, sinking beneath the surface.

\*

*Queenio, Cokio, who's got the ballio?*

*I haven't got it!*

*It isn't in my pocket.*

*Queenio, Cokio, who's got the ballio?*

The torchlight shines ahead and I follow, senselessly. I don't think about the darkness at my back, or the terrible shapes there. My body is marching on, taking me away. I numbly stare out from within, a passenger squinting through a grim pane.

Automated as a machine, the journey is rhythmic, a dull thud of slow steps, one after the next, staggering deeper and deeper into nowhere. And still I sit silently within myself, watching.

Hours of watching. Days. Years.

My mind turns to Ri. I am trying to find him. I will reach out to him with my thoughts. *Help, help... help, brother...* No answer. But I think I can see him, a humid day of sweat at his collar, busy searching for Mama's face in the seething crowds of China.

I find her first, piece by piece: the dark eyes; the stern mouth painted pink; the short jet hair; the small hand which shields a pale face from midday sun. But this is not her. Hair grows, eyes fade. I have only found a shadow of a person, a thing even less real than a photograph.

Baba's face is a shadow too, a wandering ghost beneath the earth. A dull feeling, a connection with my body reforming as I struggle, grapple in the dark, try to clutch at his body. A terrible ache as I reach around, almost fall into a sudden rock, stumbling after a thought. I turn, again and again. *Baba? Baba!* But he is gone.

Like Rolant.

I stagger and fall, hands stinging. I roll, shuffle, kick back into the sharp rock. Where is he? *Rolant?* Without him and the map, I could be anywhere now... marching ceaselessly on.

My vision seems to swing, back and forth, the pendulum in a clock. A hidden hand winds it, tighter and tighter. Back and forth, I am counting a thing called minutes in the dark until even the numbers become meaningless.

I try counting aloud, quietly and quickly, the way Ri used to. Yet it is no better than silence.

Something rises up, meets me in the closing darkness, the unbearable weight of silence, the emptiness stretching on and on, deeper and deeper into the yawning maw of the earth. It's sucking, pulling me down. The walls are closing in, layers of rock above bearing down, a narrow trap now ready to close entirely.

I scream.

I scream and scream through the passage, carving myself into the tunnels to nowhere. And screams multiply there, reverse, and rush back to surround me, lift me

up like a sudden undercurrent of hot air. Eyes streaming, I press through the noise, doubling, louder and louder.

I'll be found by the enemy. I'll be buried. I'll die like Baba.

Stumbling into passage after passage, I take turn after turn.

I'm running now, riding the scream, spinning with the light radiating from my chest, hitting and falling, crawling, clawing and flying down the passages. I ricochet from wall to wall, hardly feeling the strikes, my bones now harder, fiercer than rock.

Then suddenly something loose comes away, I lose my footing, landing hard on my front. Winded, I roll gasping. I manage to direct the light immediately behind, heart pounding even faster, dreading what it may uncover there. At first it finds nothing but more grey rock, until I shine it closer to the wall. To my surprise, it gradually illuminates a curved shape.

'Queenio Cokio,' I find myself whispering, crawling shakily towards it. I bring the ball into me, close, finding it strangely solid, the old school variety. Finally this is something real again, secure in my unsteady hands. 'Who's got the ballio?'

My breath becomes more rapid as I turn it; it is real, *real*. But there's something else, written in faded letters across it. I slowly trace the childish handwriting, wiping back dust to read: *R-H-O-S-Y-N*.

I exhale slowly. For a moment I am uncertain. I wipe away more dust, reread the letters several times. But they remain the same.

My mind is crowded again, rapid thoughts forming and reforming. I knew that she grew up in the village but how would something of hers get down here? Those strange voices—imagined or not—they were singing about a ball... two girls. They were going to play a game with a ball. But who were they? Or *are* they now?

The past and present seem to be doubling and replaying like echoes. Who was that little girl in the gas mask? Was it really Elen?

I stare into the lettering, everything steadily merging. I shake my head, attempting to clear it but I am growing increasingly tired. I know I am running out of time. And I have to know now; I have to know what Rhosyn knows. Through my rising anger, the memory begins to replay: Rhosyn turning, her blood on the floor, entranced by the crackle of white noise coming from the radio. What was it she said? *This is my favourite song*.

Even as I kneel there, clutching the ball to me, the same song is starting to form behind me, further back in the passage. The slow, steady creep of white noise, pulsing and popping, drawing closer.

I grit my teeth, hard. My nails dig deep into the ball as I hold back the heat of tears. My mind echoes with the scream of fury, not my own now, but the one which sounded from behind the gas mask as I struck it hard. A woman's scream. That sound... the sound before I lost Rolant.

I manage to stagger to my feet, keeping the ball locked under one bruised arm, swinging the light firmly ahead with the other.

'I am getting out,' I murmur, staggering quickly on. 'I will get out Rolant.'

\*

Two figures meet in the shadow of Nyth Bran Chapel.

'Preparations are almost complete. I must go soon,' says one, a man's voice, clipped by accent.

'Go? Where?' replies the other, a young girl's, afraid.

'Wherever they tell me.'

'But you'll take me with you, won't you Erich?'

A short hollow laugh. 'Any messages for me?'

‘No, I—’

‘Did you at least bring what I asked for?’

‘Yes.’

He takes the potato sack, briefly examines the contents in the moonlight, turns away. ‘Good. Now back to the farm Aderyn, before someone finds your empty bed.’

‘Erich?’

He sighs. ‘Do not be a child. Stop this now.’

She shrinks from him. ‘I am *not* a child.’

‘Things go well with the war. It is my duty to escape, help prepare the next step.’

‘You can’t go! You’ll be captured again.’

‘I can secure safe passage. But your silence,’ he says, moving closer, holding her firmly by the shoulders, ‘will keep me safest of all.’

She gazes devotedly into his face, taking in their chiselled features. She imagines what that face must have looked like before the war, before all this trouble.

He says they give him scraps, less than the dogs, at Pencraig Farm. To have him restored would make smuggling extra food worthwhile. Though tonight she managed only a serviette of steamed pudding—slop Mrs Roberts makes for using up the stale bread. Erich asks only for things that will keep: tins and jars, things already dried or pickled. And she frowns, imagining his disappointment when he finds the grey pudding, buried beneath the metals and wires, squashed in the bottom of the sack.

Everything they must eat now is grey, as if the war has rationed all the world’s taste and colour clean away. Yet through it all, Erich will love her. He will stay once he has heard her news.

‘I must tell you something,’ she says.

‘What is it?’ his voice is suddenly stern, ‘tell me quickly.’

‘Don’t worry!’ she corrects herself quickly, his hands gripping her shoulders. ‘Nobody knows about us. Or... what we’ve been doing.’

The grip eases, his arms dropping to his sides. ‘What is it then? I cannot stay long; the other prisoners must not suspect I have left the barn.’

‘We’re going to have a child.’

The hands return abruptly to her shoulders and shake her once, sharply like a sudden shock of electricity: ‘*This is not true!*’

‘E-Erich,’ she says. ‘Erich it is. I’m sure of it. Really. Well, I’m not growing fat on Mrs Roberts watery potato soup!’ She tries a laugh but it catches in her throat.

‘You’re not cross with me, are you?’

The twilight obscures his face, the shadows veiling his pale eyes, like an ominous cloud passing over a cold evening sky. She feels only his grip on her shoulders, supposing it a kind of embrace.

Inwardly, his soldier’s mind is racing, running strategies, estimating chances.

‘A child,’ is all he says when he finally speaks.

‘Our child. And you will of course stay now, won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘I must stay...’

She nods, falls into his chest, and buries herself there.

‘... *Auf kriegsdauer*,’ he adds softly, slipping these words beneath the first. And he lets her cling to him, knowing his country’s language keeps them a safe distance apart.

How could this tiny child have made another inside her? Like some unnatural Russian doll. Surely her small figure would not carry it to term? He would have to act

quickly; her situation must not be discovered. A girl's silence could not be relied upon under real interrogation. After all, there were not so many men left in this village, just enough to work the land. Any investigation would prove short. Then there would still be enough men, with guns, to hunt down a prisoner of war trying to escape the countryside. And more than enough to string him up by the neck for the little girl's violation.

He could try to run now but the radio was not even finished. How could he make contact? And truthfully, it may still take weeks to secure passage out of Wales, to reach the coast.

The first time he was captured he was fortunate; the British offices were overrun with some recent disaster, careless. With a dead man's uniform and papers, he was mishandled, unsuspected. He mounted the work lorry, endured the spit and calls of 'traitor', knowing farm labour would lead to his only chance of escape. Getting grouped with a couple of lazy Italians was also unusually fortunate. The dull pair thought nothing could be better than cleaning cow sheds for the rest of the war and weren't about to make any trouble, even if they did spy him slipping out one night. Though it would go differently if anyone else caught him. One prisoner, who momentarily abandoned his hedging, was detained within the hour.

'Listen,' he says, pulling her to face him. 'You will listen to me now.'

She stares into the depths of his eyes, where darkness has settled, as though in the shallow sockets of a mask.

Was Erich disappointed? She wanted him to tell her that this trouble was almost over; she would not have to play pretend much longer. Though she'd surprised herself at how good she was at it.

It was quite a game telling Mrs Roberts how she kept seeing mice in the house; leaving the wheatmeal around holes in the skirting boards, holes she herself made. Just as it was her who went into the pantry and used a knitting needle to tear several sacks. *Greedy little things those mice. Astonishing what they can carry away in one night.* How very clever she was at pretending. That simple farmer's wife didn't suspect a thing. And when she'd taken the rest of what Erich wanted, she'd spoken exactly as he instructed, without so much as a quaver in her voice: *Oh Mrs Roberts, he'll slap me for telling you, but that dreadful little George is at it again. He was throwing your things in the river for his games of Poohsticks. And yes Mrs Roberts, I am certain I did see him making a pig of himself too, on the canned foods and sugar ration...*

What a whipping her fellow evacuee got then. She'd heard his cries all the way from the bottom of the garden, where she'd sat with her doll. But *serves the little cockney right*, she said to herself. The beast was always pulling her hair, singing about the great bell at Bow while yanking her braid up and down, sneering so hard his freckles should have shot off like buttons from a tight blazer. Perhaps half his menace came from the news about the bombing at St Mary-le-Bow; his parents were said to have been sheltering nearby. But that was no reason to let him off! Her parents were dead too. So she'd just smiled at the sound of the sharp jinny against his hide, carried on brushing her doll's golden hair: *there now, Kizette, he shan't touch our lovely hair again. What's that dear? Yes, I hope Mrs Roberts whips his stupid freckles off too. At least it's a lesson he won't forget. Erich has made sure of that. You see how he looks after us? What a darling he is.*

And she knows, feeling his warm breath against her lips, as he draws her closer, that Erich is a darling. That he won't let the Welsh bumpkins pack her off to some awful orphanage at the end of the war. Anyone trying to harm her will get what



George did, or worse. The so-called 'enemy' is not a bit what people are saying. Just as soon as Erich's men arrive, they'll get everything back to how it was, and *better*.

There'll be toys again, lots of them, just like the ones ripped from her grasp, back in her London playroom—one suitcase indeed! Erich will make her another set of toys, better than the first. And there'll be real food again. There'll be jam! Buckets of the stuff. No more Woolton Pie, tasting like soil because that old toad Mrs Roberts insists peeling vegetables is: *a waste, you little madam!* Oh, how she longed for cake again... and not the insipid carrot variety either. She imagines Erich scanning the newspaper at the breakfast table, like her father used to, and there she'll be: next to baby, buttering his toast an inch thick.

'I will write a letter,' says Erich. 'I will need you to pretend again.'

'Oh yes, anything. Just promise this will all be over soon?' she says.

'You must pretend this letter is from your father.'

'Daddy?' she says. 'But poor old Daddy was killed in the air raid.'

'You will pretend; it will say there was a mistake. Your parents are alive but your mother is hurt badly. You must return to London. They are to take you to the station. A fare will appear paid and you will pretend to board. The platform will be busy. I will show you how to disappear.'

'Disappear?'

'You will come back to me,' he says quietly. 'And I will take care of everything.'

Her heart leaps. How exciting to run away with Erich, how completely romantic!

'Oh, but Erich how? Where will we go?'

'Go?' he says. 'We cannot. We must stay here.'

'You don't mean... *down there*.'

'There is plenty of water down there. Food saved enough for months. I have eaten nothing. Taken candles and matches from the chapel.'

She frowns. Nothing but canned meat and pickled eggs for weeks? And here she was thinking about jam!

'Erich must we really?'

'After I escape Pencraig, we will be safe there together, until they call off the search for me. And the invasion will come soon. There will be everything I have promised.' He brings her close. 'Do you love me?'

'Of course!'

'Say this to me.'

'I love you.'

'Then you will do this, for me?'

'All right... yes, I'll do it.'

'You have the doll I made you?'

She brings the doll out from under her coat. 'Kizette? Yes, always. Just as you told me. You were so clever to make her. And you *will* make more for me, won't you? I shall have one of each colour! The next must have chestnut sausage curls, a dress in pink satin and—'

In his father's German toyshop, spoilt little girls like this one came in every day. Of course there he had proper moulds, glazes and paints, luxury dresses worth more than a grown woman's. Now he worked pitifully with river clay, the bone ash of rats and fish, course hair from cow tails.

By the light of half a candle, his two fellow prisoners watched him cut Kizette's dress from a serviette using only a pair of sheep shears.

'Bravo!' Grieco said, the yellow stripes sewn into his clothes flashing as he rolled over to sleep on the barn floor. 'Next time you steal the tablecloth too friend;

you make us new uniforms, sì?' He pulled the blanket over himself with a boyish laugh. 'Then maybe I go home and not get shot as co-operator.'

Pasqua, his waxy skin glowing in the half light, stayed awake watching him mix paint in an old bully beef tin, recoiling from the acrid smell of tealeaves and pickling fluid. 'In Germany this was your living?' he snorted. 'I get good money in Italy to make her roads. Per carità! Here I milk cows, clean their houses. And the pay?' He waved his ration of cigarettes, proffering one. 'It makes us co-operators.'

Erich only frowned. Told him it was almost dawn and he should sleep. The cows would want feeding, the stalls would need scrubbing. And to Grieco and Pasqua, to anyone else, he would continue to seem a co-operator, a prisoner amiably making toys in his free hour to amuse his captor's children. This is how it would stay until the day came to shed the brown and yellow suit like a dry husk, pull himself glowing and free, ready to run, to serve the Fatherland once more.

In the meantime, to Aderyn, he must speak exactly as his father did to the stupid girls at the toyshop counter. Behind its large metallic register, he would pull a smile across his face as though from a tapered brush, saying sedately:

'Anything you wish, this I will get for you.'

'Oh, Erich you promise?'

'Meet me here again, under the usual moon.' He pulls a scroll of paper from his breast pocket. 'You will keep this in our usual hiding place. Until I escape Pencraig, this cannot fall into the wrong hands. Even if I do. You understand?'

'But what is it?'

'Keep it safe inside the doll. And keep the doll with you always. Promise me this?'

'I promise.'

'Aderyn,' he says as he gives her the paper, 'do not use it.'

'What is it?'

He pauses for a moment, choosing his words. 'A map,' he says. 'But it is not for you to use.'

'Why would I—'

'Whatever happens to me, stay out of the caves. Do not go down there alone.'

'Why? What's down there?'

He embraces her once, briefly. Grips her tight and releases, like a handshake. 'Our final solution,' he says, 'to this war.'

He turns before she can say anything more, running rapidly through the headstones and over the low wall, until his entire form fades, merges with the darkness.

\*

The earth handles me, meaning to fill me up and bury me, break and build me into more of itself. My limbs grow slow, stiff. The terrible popping of white noise still shadows me, somewhere further behind in the tunnel.

And then the torch strikes a small shape on the ground. I approach it, still gripping the ball close to my side. And, rolling the light over it again, I see stitching, fabric? I put the ball down, turning over the new object in the dust. It reveals a small pompom—a hat.

A lump forms in my throat as I recognise it is Rolant's.

Only this is his bobble hat, not the deerstalker he wore today, yesterday, the day that could be any other, down here in the dark. I hold it close for a moment. It is the hat he wore the first time he brought us down here—the hat he threw down at the static following us.

And I realise slowly that I may be going the right way. I try to retrace our steps; this passage must stretch back towards the cavern with the toys, and then the way out through Crythor Forest. Above it runs the passage which leads out beneath the old tree? I pull the hat down over my ashy hair, pressing on, aware the static is growing closer.

The passage soon slopes upwards, finding newer air. I fill my mind with tranquil scenes depicted in Baba's folding books until they float like inky mirages, reshaping the darkness. When I first glimpse something ahead, I cannot trust it is real. Yet the torchlight is increasingly catching the edges of objects, framed in the oval opening to a cavern.

Breath catching in my throat, I press on, flashing the light around the shape of the opening, letting it flow inside. Slumping against the opening, I hold the light steady so it travels across the glassy-eyed stare of the china dolls, still sitting immaculately in their chair. I illuminate the carousel.

It has moved.

The pig now poses at the opposite side, laughing. Closest to me, Ben is rearing and... headless.

I instinctively flash the light through the rest of the cavern, behind me. Heart racing, I rush over to Ben. Placing the ball down, I am able to trace the newly serrated edges of metal.

A note sounds behind me. It comes once, a tremor, which causes me to whip around.

The music box.

It sits innocently on the edge of the tiny desk, surrounded by wooden dominoes. The ballerina still shudders on her tiny spring.

Blood pounds in my ears as I inch closer.

Even as I do, it sounds again. The little chipped face of the ballerina quivers. I lift the box, memories of our last meeting swirling through my mind like the gas itself. Who has brought it back here? The woman in the mask? Why? My throat becomes tighter, recalling the burning as the poison gas crept through me, through Rolant.

And immediately I want to smash it, smash everything in this evil place. I feel possessed again by the great raging dragon of the tunnels, wanting to scream through the darkness again, light it up like fire. I raise the box high above my head, meaning to dash it against the wall.

Something falls from within. It clinks to the ground and I thrust the music box back onto the desk. I shine the torch to the floor and find the winking key. Before I can even consider what it's for, the box twinges a third time and I see it is sitting just above a drawer in the desk—a drawer with a keyhole.

I flash the light around the cavern once more to check that I am alone. It sweeps the carousel, travels the faces of the dolls, their vacant stare my only audience. And exhaling slowly, I reach for the brass key.

It is small, fits perfectly in the lock as I turn it. There is a click and I pull the drawer out to reveal the patchy felt lining within. A few small items lie scattered inside: a tarnished whistle on a chain, a few spotted shotgun shells, and a scorched manila envelope.

I hastily pull out the envelope and tuck it tightly between my chest and the lining of my coat. I then lock the drawer again, replacing the key inside the music box. This done, I head back over to Ben, or what's left of him, and retrieve the ball.

'Goodbye Ben,' I say quietly.

It takes me some time to find the low fissure with the loose stones. Someone has already been through and scattered them. Part of me fears they will be waiting on the other side. This fear sits heavily with another: the torch is beginning to dull.

I twist, elbows beating like wings as I force a way through. I pull myself into the low tunnel, coughing into my arm, whipping the light around. But there is nothing but grey stone. I strain hard to hear signs of movement but there is nothing, not even static now. The ceiling is low, just enough to be able to crouch against and shuffle along, following the slope upwards. Soon I recognise the teeth-like ridges at either side, the chalky dust clouding my feet.

I am going the right way; *I have to be.*

This is when I see the dark handprint, even smaller than I remembered. I adjust the hat on my head and bring the ball back under my arm. I know I cannot stay long, the torch will not last. Nevertheless, I take a moment to stare, the way Rolant did, into it. Something in me miserably tries to find a way back to that first visit, before I lost him.

I spit into my own hand and press it against the tiny handprint. Pulling away, it leaves its own dark imprint. It dries and fades before my eyes, receding into the dust as though the wall is swallowing it.

As I walk on, I think I hear water and remember the waterfall—how thirsty I am. Suddenly, I stumble on a rust coloured rock, fall sideways into another, dropping the ball. My head hits the opposite wall, hard. Shaking it clear, I step back and steady myself against the rippled side of the passage.

Shining the torch around, I dizzily scan for the ball. I turn and turn again. I see it resting against a large black stone but when I bend to collect it, there is another rush of light-headedness. I mean to step forward but instead feel myself just rocking, or is it *the passage moving?*

I shake my head again and try to remember where I am going. What was I looking for? The ball. But I have the ball.

*Queenio, Cokio, who's got the ballio?*

No, there was something else I was looking for...

Even as I think this, I stagger on, slumping between the walls, from one to the next like a dusty pinball. As I begin to collapse back into the opposite wall again, there is something appearing on it.

I rub my sleeve across my eyes, widen them, disbelieving. A tiny handprint is forming in the dust. Swinging the dimming light behind me, I try to imagine how I could have come back in a circle. Only, when I return to the wall again, I realise this print is much higher than the last one. And it is darkening, not fading, before my eyes. It materialises at an angle, the index finger pointing.

Raising the torch, it reveals a black hole—the passage up. I exhale, a short gasping sound, my lips stinging with dirt. But when I try to shine the light back onto the handprint, it has vanished.

I throw the ball up several times, testing the height of the passage. It takes a few tries before it audibly bounces out at the top. I then ascend after it, scraping most of my arms and legs, hearing fabric catch and tear more than once. But I am only one of the characters in Baba's folding book, five strokes of an inked brush, moving slowly and carefully as Tai Chi in a black landscape, just before the smear of sunrise. And as I reach the lip of the fissure, I am steadily able to pull myself up and through, rolling on my side breathless next to the ball.

Water sounds once more. The sound possesses me instantly, dragging my feet towards it. Soon, the torchlight catches movement ahead and lights up the familiar jet of spray. I manage a cracked smile and limp closer, catching droplets in my hand.

Without hesitation, I am bringing the icy water to my lips and drinking. The water is crisp and soon I am bringing it to my face too, my eyes, clearing the layers of grime.

I flash the rapidly diminishing light around once more and find the luminous edge of the crystal pools. Following them, I keep the torch low, remembering a deadly hole is somewhere along this passage.

It is not long before I find it. Once past, my heart begins to quicken in anticipation of escape. I feel the ceiling steadily rise, my footsteps sloping upwards too, soon coming to the narrow cleft in the rock where I know I must squeeze through sideways; '*Like a crab*,' I recall Rolant's voice saying. A lump forms in my throat and I must grit my teeth again to not stop, to not think. Instead I hurry through, catching my breath every time the torch flickers and winks momentarily out.

Yet when the torch finally dies, I find I can still see. I gasp, glancing at the torch and confirming it is still dead. The dull black shapes of teeth, jutting pieces from the ceiling, remain visible. Soon I can feel the wind, hear it rushing down around me. Ahead, there appears an almond-shaped disc of blue light. I desperately chase its pale glow.

But there is something else there. The moonlight is glinting off a smooth black surface, appearing like a slick branch, lying there across the path. It is not until I lift it, feel the heaviness, that I realise it is the shotgun. And I swing it by the leather strap over one shoulder. Then staying low, I creep through the fissure, finding my shadow appears at my side beneath the stars. Rolant's silhouette too once crossed this hearth between light and dark. Still wearing his hat, I pause.

A cloud drifts over the moon. I grip the ball in both hands, grit my teeth, turn it slowly. The cloud passes on. And moonlight escapes, striking Rhosyn's name, written across the ball's surface like a bullet of silver.

\*

Dusk is settling in a low mist across the fields. Afan whistles for his dog but the sound dies on his lips, remembering he has left her at the farm with his wife and little son Gethin.

He shakes his head and pulls the Dai cap down over his wiry eyebrows. Not a good thing for a farmer to be out without his dog with the night coming down around him. Still, he has his duty to the flock.

The wind howls like a wolf.

He rearranges the shotgun in the crook of his arm, starting up the hill, whistling a tune instead. The sheep would be out on the field, not minding the winds, but perhaps clustering beneath the old oak if they thought rain might be coming. He would cast a quick eye over them, see if the ewe with the limp was faring any better, and then head back to the farmhouse where his wife was busy cooking up one of Pencraig's turkeys.

*'I am a little collier and gweithio underground,'* he sings to himself. *'The raff will never torri,'* he continues, striding up the hill with his head down against the wind, *'when I go up and down. It's bara when I'm hungry,'* he casts an eye to the grey sky, *'and cwrw when I'm dry. It's gwely when I'm tired. And nefoedd wh—'*

The words falter as he crests the hill and sees the stranger at the gate to the field. He is tall with hair the colour of ash, skin pale as milk. His forearms ripple with veins as he pulls the sheep carcass up onto the stile where it hangs, dangling and pendulous with its throat freshly cut.

Afan is quick, knowing the wind was in his favour, concealed the sound of his approach. The man remains occupied struggling with the bloodied fleece where it has

become snagged on the fencepost. And Afan locks and aims so that, when he finally calls over to him, he faces the man down the barrel of his gun.

‘Hold it right there, sheep killer!’

The man looks up but his face remains expressionless. Even as Afan approaches, edging closer, not dropping his aim by an inch, he sees that this man’s eyes are cold. They gaze at him, static as marble, a pale blue veined in grey. The eyes of a statue, Afan thinks, as he looks into them, seeing how they followed his movements but without any detectable humanity.

‘You let her go, you hear?’ he says, indicating the ground between them. ‘Put her down easy like and step away.’ He cocks his head to confirm it is one of his own, finding it is the ewe with the limp, his farm’s mark just visible through her blood. ‘She’s one o’ mine,’ he says, motioning again with the gun, ‘you put her down!’

The man stares for a moment then does just as instructed, pulling the ewe suddenly from the post, in one violent motion. He then straightens, Afan feeling himself shrink a little in his shadow.

Though likely no more than nineteen, the man is solid and broad, the pale eyes staring out from the cowl of a firm and overbearing forehead. This is no passing vagrant or madman. If anything, the strong back suggests a labourer from one of the neighbouring farms. Though, even in wartime, none were so savage as to be making off with another farm’s sheep. And in this final consideration, Afan suddenly knows exactly who the man is.

‘Well bless me, if it’s not the missing Jerry from Pencraig Farm!’ he says. ‘Oh, we’d near enough given up looking for you.’

He slowly takes in the old farming clothes, thinking he recognises the shirt as one he has seen before, the previous season, on one of the young balers.

‘Stole that too, I’d wager,’ says Afan, pointing up and down the man with the nose of the gun, ‘from the boots to the braces. Not surprising you’ve not been found; here’s us out looking for a prisoner of war in his stripes.’

The man offers nothing in reply. He simply gazes on, as though looking through Afan to somewhere else.

‘Well stripes or no, you’re coming back with me,’ states Afan. ‘My civic duty to turn you in. So no tricks or trouble from you now. You’ll come quietly back down the hill, won’t you lad?’

The man doesn’t move.

‘Now you listen here,’ says Afan, never one to trust silent types at the best of times. ‘You’ve had one of *my* sheep there. A good one too, she was. Would likely have got a pair of lambs from ‘er in the Spring. So that’s three you’ve robbed me of. And robbed by a German no less! No one here would bat an eye if I were to right now shoot you where you stand. So you *will* come quietly,’ he says, removing the safety in one swift motion and aligning the barrel with the man’s head, ‘or you’ll not be coming at all.’

The steady gaze flickers. Then it slowly turns to the slope of the hill and the man begins walking, though not as a prisoner at gunpoint. He walks as though he were alone, his back remaining straight, arms relaxed at his sides. Afan stays at a safe distance, ready to prompt should the pace slow, or the man suddenly make a break for it in either direction. Then he would have to shoot the legs out from under him. The very thought turns Afan’s stomach and he prays to God it won’t come to that.

However the man does not appear to be planning any kind of escape. His pace remains steady, despite the strong wind now at their backs, his face fixed straight ahead. Perhaps after all, this man is relieved to give himself up? On the run like a hunted fox, with nothing but his skin, is no life. Unless, fox-like, he is just tearing up

farm animals for sport, driven mad with starvation. Afan marks the man's stained hands and arms: still dark, elbow high with blood.

'We'll cut through the edge of Crythor Forest!' he shouts ahead.

The man pauses but does not turn.

'It'll be quicker back that way,' insists Afan, addressing the sharp blades of the man's back. He watches as they appear to tense slightly, quiver like the flank of a stallion before it bolts the gate.

'Neither of us want this business dragged out longer than what's needed,' he continues, anticipating a sudden struggle. 'And it's better *both* of us make it back in one piece. Come on now.'

And to Afan's surprise, the shoulders seem to shrug indifferently and the man begins walking towards the edge of the forest.

As they enter, several rooks take flight and it is all a startled Afan can do not to shoot the man square in the back. But the German continues to step coolly ahead of him, their shadows merging beneath the pines, and Afan shakes his head and tells himself to keep his wits. He thumbs the safety back on.

'Over to the left,' he instructs, stumbling slightly. 'And stick to the path.'

The man complies, eyes still set ahead.

*I do fancy this brazen Jerry is banking on Pencraig being fool enough to take him back*, Afan thinks to himself. After all, their farm was as good a place as you could find to stick out a war. He recalls seeing, not a day ago, their remaining two Italian prisoners acting real jocose in the field.

'Now he look like us, sì?' one remarked as Afan passed by where they stood painting stripes on the bull.

The other waved his brush at his friend's banded uniform. 'Sì! No car in blackout hit Pasqua either if he break gate!'

They'd both rolled around laughing in the sunshine, cigarettes hanging from the corners of their mouths, doing impressions of cars hitting '*toro*' and each other until the bull began to snort with impatience.

Those Italians knew just how good they had it, being out of the war. Could this German be any different? Treading stoically before him, precise, mechanical as a machine, grinding the twigs beneath his heavy feet like a tank, it seemed possible his sort may well take the battlefield over the field. Any road, in trying to escape, the Jerry ensured no farm would take him in again.

An unexpected sidestep shakes Afan from his thoughts.

'Keep to the path!' he demands, adjusting his own footing.

Yet even as he does this, the man steps again, this time sharply, purposefully. Before he can even think to question it, the man stops. Afan stumbles back in surprise so as not to walk right into him. While he is still on the backfoot, the man suddenly springs.

A hand seizes the barrel of the shotgun, spinning it so Afan momentarily faces the long dark cavity of its mouth. But it continues past, seeming to flicker in Afan's mind, like a bird passing across the sun, just another shadow in the forest. Then he is thrust backwards until his legs slow and seem to run in place. Pines are growing taller, stretching higher and higher, fluid lines, ink running into the paling light. There is the smell of earth, wet ferns, as Afan realises he is almost level with them.

'A sinkhole!' he cries. 'Duw get me out of it!'

But the man only looks on as Afan's hands begin sweeping around for some leverage, a root or heavy branch, to pull himself out with. The moss only crumbles to nothing beneath his nails and the roots are set deep and unyielding. All of his

struggling seems only to quicken the ground's hold, the icy mud sucking around his midriff.

Seizing his cap from his head, he draws it across his wet brow, casts it on the ground at the other man's feet.

'Pull me out!' he cries. 'Give me your hand!'

The man only continues his silent vigil. And something in the fixed way he stands tells Afan that he has no intention of pulling him out. More than this, watching him take a step back, so the marble gaze gradually eclipses in the gloom, he realises that this man *meant* for him to fall in. All the time he thought this man his prisoner, he was in fact purposefully luring him here. And this realisation seizes him with a sudden, frantic terror.

He wrenches at his legs, thick and heavy in the mire below, scrabbles all around himself again with his hands, for something, anything to hold onto. But there is nothing. He thrashes like a rabbit caught in a snare, lurching and twisting himself until he is exhausted and deeper than ever, so that it takes his remaining strength to keep his arms above the mud now encircling his shoulders.

'You evil bastard!' he spits finally, panting and shivering. 'Shoot me then Jerry. You can't let a man die like *this*!'

'You are no man to me...' comes the voice from the shadows, strange and hollow as an echo.

'So you *can* talk,' Afan snarls, 'by mae'r Diafol you can!'

'Tell me,' the man continues coolly, 'how many men are in the village now?' He begins examining the gun, turning it in his red hands. 'How many will come looking for you?'

'You'll get *nothing* out of me,' Afan replies though gritted teeth.

'On the contrary,' he says, advancing, 'I intend to take *all* that I want.' And he sets down the gun, just out of reach, though Afan finds himself, in desperation, reaching for it anyway. 'We will take your homes...' the man continues as he begins collecting great handfuls of earth, sticks and pine needles, and throwing them about Afan's descending body. 'We will take the villages, the towns, the cities...' Afan coughs and attempts to swat away the debris, hurling back what he can before his head goes under. 'This will be our land, our language...' Afan hears screaming, realising it is his own desperate cries for help. Despite himself, he is begging for his life, crying out the name of his wife, his son Gethin, but to no avail. The voice only concludes: 'This will be *our* world.' And then the earth is filling Afan's mouth, his ears. With an unpleasant thud he feels a weight on his head, pushing him deeper, burying him alive...

Erich removes his boot from the farmer's head and spits on the ground where it disappeared. Retrieving the gun, he surveys the sky. There would be little time to retrieve the sheep and get back underground before dark.

He sets off at a run, kicking up the earth behind him, unknowingly disturbing the Dai cap that would eventually direct the search party to poor Afan's body. Though it would leave none wiser as to why the poor farmer risked the forest, instead of the path through the fields.

\*

The field crunches with frost beneath me. A low sunrise pastes the horizon red and the cottage comes into view. Its silhouette sits against the sky, appearing shadowy and vacant, unreal as a cut-out against the early light.

As I approach, the bark of the Alsatian sounds, once, resonating in the thin air. I stagger alongside Bedlinog's gate. He growls.



Further on, I find the bulk of Rhosyn's old burgundy estate. It is parked diagonally, halfway up the drive, with its front wheels embedded in the grass verge. And I pause, staring into the blank shape of Llwynypia's door. *What am I planning?*

I become aware that part of the white noise from the caves seems to have clung to me, permeated my very skin. I feel it prickle there, disturb the frequency of my thoughts with humming and popping.

*What have I come here to do?*

A dull noise on the cottage's roof makes me start. I step further back and find a magpie has landed there. And I watch it strut, lifting its stiff talons, beginning to pick at the mossy shingles with the blade of its beak.

*'One for sorrow,'* comes the voice from behind.

I turn and realise Rhosyn has been sitting, slumped in the weeds, with her back against the estate. Her bare legs and feet point outwards at awkward angles from a full-length coat.

Her smile is a sedated one as she eyes the bird. 'Hello, Mr. Magpie. How are you *today?*' she recites. 'Where's your wife, your child and your *family?*'

*'Rhosyn?'*

In one white fist, a black bottle is winking in the growing morning light. The other fist twitches slightly, closed in her lap. Everything else about her is strangely fixed; only the eyes roam freely, reaching up to the roof. Her lips part a little, tremble as her rasp escapes: *'Diafol, devil, I defy thee.'*

I glance at the car, its wheels clotted with mud and debris. There are traces of a failed but forcible reverse: deep grooves beneath each wheel where each has spun, shredded the flowerbed, and tossed it into neighbouring hedges. How long has she been sprawled here? Was there time to have returned from the caves? My mind vibrates with static and this imagined scene: the car racing back, hurtling up the drive and straight into a ditch of its own making.

I want to ask her where she has been, shake out some answers, and make her tell me everything. Yet I feel locked in place, unsettled by the way she is arranged there.

The ball slips. I let it fall. It bounces once, rolls, and comes to a halt at Rhosyn's naked feet. I watch as it then slightly turns, as if positioned by some invisible force. The faded letters of her name face her, as though magnetised to their owner. Her eyes, in turn, stare, fixedly into the letters.

*'One for sorrow,'* she says quietly. *'I recognise you.'*

*'So, it is yours?'*

She doesn't acknowledge me. When she speaks, it is as though she is speaking to the ball itself. 'Thought the ashman took you away. No wait, that's not it...' Her eyes flicker and close. 'Back and fore from the forest. We all there, bar one. She gone with 'im. Was 'im what did it to her I know... *One for sorrow.* Came onto me, sayin' he found the ball but not her. That Queenie was laughing. *Two for joy.'*

Her eyes slowly open but return to the roof now, where a second magpie has landed. It chatters there with the first, squabbling.

*'Who? Who are you talking about?'*

*'Three for a girl,'* she mutters. *'She lived here before...'*

And a third magpie appears, landing abruptly on the roof with the others. Morning lights the turquoise in its tail feathers.

*'I can't wait to see the toys Rhosyn...'* Rhosyn coughs and the sound is wet. 'She were runnin', going. In the dark. *Carn go in there,* I told her. *Carn go down there... not with 'im Dilys.'* A strange expression crosses her face now, an empty grin, wide eyed and garish as a mask. 'But that real chesty one said he'd *go in with her*

*a'right. He not afraid of a belter if they get caught. So he make me think I got no choice. Have to go in that miserable cave.'*

*'Who? Who made you go in?'*

Her voice drops low, acidic with sudden loathing. Another bird drops to the roof with a low thud; *'four for a boy... old twp Wally-Walter.'*

*'And were you down there tonight?'* I say, shaking. *'Was, was it you? Answer me! Or was it Walter?'*

I think to seize her foolish drunk body, slap the truth from it. But my legs ache and keep me only just balancing upright.

*'That boy had nothing good in 'im. Cocking his nose when I say 'e done something with Dilys. Sayin' he'll tell was me. I'm not sharp enough to do something like that, 'e says. None will believe it. Oh, not sharp enough for anything says 'e. And I knew was 'im but said naught. Were no coming better after that... until another girl goes. And now it's all starting up again. The same song... won't stop playing.'*

Her head lolls to the side, groaning. I watch as one hand raises—a fist. She looks at it, resignedly. *'But that's life in the real world, my girl.'* She laughs softly to herself. *'The twp don't last in it—,'* the fist opens like a trap, emptying its contents, a dozen little capsules fall, bounce and dance across the concrete, *'but neither do we.'* She laughs softly to herself. *'Down we all go. Down, down, down. You'll still keep quiet Rhosyn... or you'll go down too. Down to the dark.'* And her eyes roll closed. *'Good.'*

One dropped capsule oscillates, a tiny spinning bullet of colour, coming closer and closer. It glides at my feet, a blur of white and yellow. I watch as the pill slows, becomes two blocks of stationary colour, an impersonal little black code: *LV 901*.

*'What have you taken?'*

I will myself to move. My blood races, propels me forwards, but the world seems to slow, come away, as I reach for her. The white noise from the cave is in my ears, no, coming from deep inside the cottage. The radio is on somewhere within, full volume, projecting out the humming static.

*'Rhosyn?'* I say shaking her shoulders, once and hard. *'What have you done!'*

Kneeling, I feel the rest of the little capsules popping and bursting beneath my weight as I shake her again. But when her eyes slide open, they are distorted. The pupils are like tiny inhuman pinpricks, lost in a slowing nebula of blue.

*'How many have you taken?'*

My voice is like an echo, so far away it cannot be my own. And I watch the pinpricks dull, hear her breath become short and shallow. She blinks once, at the tiding of magpies now scattering, bickering on the roof.

*'Five for silver...' she says, 'six for gold.'* The tiny pinpricks twitch once more, and their strange stare looks through me, to somewhere else. She blinks a final time, murmurs: *'Seven for a secret, never to be told.'*

I fall back.

On the roof, the magpies at once grow silent. I watch as they hop to the edge of the guttering, peering down at us, heads cocked. Their eyes glitter.

Is this the secret Owen sensed in his bones? Dilys? *Bring it straight to me.* I wish it were that easy, in this village of secrets nobody wants told.

I stagger to my feet and swing the gun from my back. I can feel the white noise growing, in the cottage and in my head, sense the dizziness multiplying with the static. I must get help somehow. My skins prickles and stings as I aim the barrel upwards.

The gun immediately explodes, throws me back and down with its force. Collapsing to meet my shadow on the concrete, I can hear the magpies blaring and

taking flight into the sky. Their own shadows pass over me like ghostly hands as I lie on my back, shaking.

I see how the light catches the blue in their feathers, winking so hopefully.  
'*Happiness magpie*,' I hear myself say, recalling their name in China.  
And I imagine they are flying to brother Ri, taking my happiness.

\*

I become a piece swept up, detached, in the breeze blowing East. Broken and scattered, I drift somewhere out beyond scratched mountains, down slopes with smudged tails of mist. High above the earth, I speckle as tiny and insignificant as droplets slowly seeping into one darkly lined horizon. As ink, shadow and thunder, I wait to become.

Time stretches. A sigh rises. Strikes of bamboo trees blow and clash. A shadow coils and collides between their hard canes, vibrations clattering to the tops.

Something hisses a name, winding its words through leaves and water. Pebbles flash and stir in the stream, forming a set of scales, snaking in the bed. Winding and rising, they twist, weaving like rippling bullion cord, parting to reveal the dragon eye. It burns as a white hot sun, burning through me like paper.

A thumb roughly prises my eye open. *Flash*. The other eye. *Flash*.

I groan and struggle against the searing light, resist rough hands, pulling me out and up. Light swallows everything momentarily in a burst of white. Then suddenly sound. *Birds*. I hear the magpies.

A face forms. The lines of the ears and jaw appear slowly, as though guided by a pen, and the mouth appears as a dark crease, lined deeply as it moves apart into a black pit.

'*Wake up. Wake up. Wake up!*'

The shadowy brow forms, dull and square. It leans in, a strand of hair arcing.

'*Ri?*' I feel my mouth part, the word escaping gradually like a breath I have been holding. '*Ri.*'

But the face is changing, growing taller and darker against the sun. I reach out to touch it but my fingers just pass through, as though it is only shadow.

The world takes form around me. There are quivering outlines of trees now, the swimming grain of pebbledash.

'*Wake up for God's sake!*' comes the voice suddenly and something hits my face hard, slapping it sideways.

Light pops and shoots, abruptly revealing the windows of Llwynypia. I shake my head and struggle, hearing something else fall immediately back in the gravel. I turn and see it is Rhosyn, sprawled unnaturally as though she were a doll just flung from the roof.

I hazily follow tracks in the stones leading to me, realise I have been dragged. I feel myself propped next to her, against the car. Why?

'*She won't be waking up. She didn't decide to go to sleep,*' a matter of fact voice is explaining, '*she rather decided to die.*'

'Decided to die,' I find myself repeating as though I were explaining it to myself. I squint at the red blurring her mouth.

'Her mouth,' I murmur.

'*A little bird had a message to tell her and sealed it with a kiss. Peck, peck, pecked it quite shut. Aren't you lucky it didn't fancy telling you anything?*'

I turn my head slowly away from the horrible sight, rotating against cold metal, recognising the voice.

'Yes,' the hard little lips are saying without moving, *'what luck! Not one magpie cared for your dirty mouth nor minded to paint you a new one. Must be all those lies you do tell. Lies will make a girl taste bitter as a crabapple.'*

'As a crabapple,' says another voice darkly.

'Be a dear, Walter, and do shut up. Is it not enough that I am forced to look at your own pecked face and not scream? You should have paid me some grace and left me in that dark trunk!'

'Don't say that!'

'Or what? You'll forget me in there again?'

'I didn't—'

'Oh?' the curls jerk fiercely, *'but isn't that just your remedy for everything of late? Lock it away in the dark. Of all your miserable little ideas, I must say this—'*

'Shut up! Just—'

Something strikes the car hard. And then silence. Silence as I stare at Walter: the wounds across his cheeks, the dark red pit of his left eye. This must have been the doing of the birds at Nyth Bran Chapel. He holds a fist of golden hair, Kizette swinging like a pendulum with tiny eyes locked shut. His own remaining eye glares at me from beneath the tattered cloth cap.

'Zhǐ rén,' I breathe. Closing my eyes for a moment, I try to find my way back to where I was before. But it is lost.

'And what does that mean?' he says, as I hear the shotgun sliding through the gravel like a viper.

'Paper figure,' I say, exhausted. 'Just a paper figure.'

And I watch him bring the doll and the gun to the chest of his torn cloth suit as he says: 'Kizette isn't—'

'Jīn tóng yù nǚ,' I think aloud. 'Yes, that's who you are: Golden Boy doll and—', I laugh quietly, staring into the gun, thinking of Rolant, and hating, hating them for what they did to him. My eyes sting and roll onto Kizette. 'And Jade Girl doll. Just paper dolls. Dolls to burn, send in smoke to the dead.'

Circles of chalk seem to dance in my vision, circles Ri and I drew and redrew in pavements for months. I seem to smell our joss paper dolls burning and burning for Baba, their black faces curling into ashes along with their stacks of ghost money. I see us watching from a Chinese pavement, watching that smoke rise, imagining it reaching Baba. But what will reach Rolant? Anything, down there in the dark? I close one fist beneath me, pressing sharp stones into my palm.

Kizette is shaken once and her lashes jar, flash up to reveal the glassy eyes. The white web of a crack snakes through one eye.

'Witless little fool,' she spits. *'There's no paper left in me girl; you and that oaf saw to that! So tell us, where might you be hiding it now? You nasty little thief! Where is it?'*

'Where is it?' says Walter.

'Where's our map, ridiculous girl?'

'I don't know,' I say, sensing only the envelope still in my pocket. 'Maybe the wind took it away.'

'How would you like the wind to take you away?' Walter says. He loads the gun with one violent pump of the slide and aims. 'The map, last chance now, where is it?'

'I think... I would rather the wind take me,' I say, swallowing. 'I don't really belong here anyway, do I?'

'Well now, you honorary Aryans really should learn to stay where you are put then.'

'We don't need to talk about—,' starts Walter.

'*I can decide what we need to talk about!*' snaps Kizette.

'But we came for the map!'

'*Perhaps the boy had it all along. Did you think of that, you miserable Cyclops?*'

'Rolant didn't have it,' I say through gritted teeth. 'You didn't have to hurt him.'

'*She's lying!*' shrieks Kizette. '*I told you to go after him and not this one.*'

Thinking of Rolant again, his body disappearing in the terrible gas, makes my head churn even more.

'*We'll just have to go down again.*'

'I'm not—'

'*So you want to let the little wretches stuff up everything for us! Years of planning, everything your family sacrificed.*'

'But what about—'

'*Oh poppycock! We'll be gone before anyone—*'

'And if Rhosyn told anyone?'

'*Oh, shut up Walter!*'

'Don't tell me—'

'*Or what? You'll smack me like—*'

'I'll smack you like D—'

'*Mother will hear of this!*'

'No!'

'*She'll smack YOU!*' Kizette snarls. '*So be a dear, shut up, and go get our map from the boy.*'

'There's no time before the Michaelmas eclipse, before it all collapses.'

'*Shhh!*' Kizette says sharply. Her hard face tilts down at me, lashes flickering. They remain hovering only half open as she says: '*We'll finish here first. Search her just in case... when she won't struggle.*' Her head jerks once in the direction of the gun and she adds carefully with her lidded stare: '*Then prepare for the Black Sun.*'

Walter nods slowly and steps back a few paces, his outline unsteady in my blurring gaze. My body feels limp, as though I am the useless paper doll, preparing to be blown into ash.

'Nicht durch reden werden große fragen entschieden,' Walter recites flatly, as though from a book, and he sits Kizette gently on the car bonnet. He raises the barrel and his finger circles to the trigger as he murmurs: 'Sondern durch eisen und blut.'

But something large is bursting from the hedge alongside the cottage, ears flapping like a hare, and with astounding agility, it is halfway to Walter before he has even turned.

I seize my chance and use the last of my energy, flinging it out with a cry, I release the fistful of stones, see them spread and strike hard, blasting Kizette from the bonnet like a coconut in a shy. The others catch Walter and he yelps in pain, whipping around again to face me.

But from behind, the hedge creature has already leapt several paces, throwing itself through the air with an untamed cry. Yet it is also somehow in front, battling the gun from Walter's hands.

The sun at their backs, they are blackened into one mass of arms and legs, but I slowly realise it is three figures all struggling and shrieking for the gun.

They flail and turn, around and around, a tangle of hitting and bellowing. Then the ball of limbs abruptly falls, as one, with a sudden crack. Walter's voice can

be heard shrieking as the other two shapes struggle out into a retreat, one brandishing the weapon above their head like a captured flag.

But Walter remains on the ground, moaning. At first I think he has been shot, but then no, the noise was not loud enough.

He suddenly lifts the body above his head, a shock of sunlight revealing Kizette's limp and shattered form. Her tiny face is split, smashed in two jagged pieces, and Walter brandishes them both in his fists like the body of his child, wailing louder and louder. Kizette's cracked eye spins once in its mechanism before falling to the gravel, bouncing, and disappearing like just another piece of dead stone.

'Look what you've done. Look what you've DONE!' Walter screams. 'Filth! Murderers! You've killed her! Filth!' he sobs. *'You did this!'*

'And th-this!' comes the triumphant voice of Faelan and she swings the gun down hard like a hammer. Weaving forwards, her face is illuminated for a moment, blood whipping across her chin, wild and leering as she strikes the blow.

There is a dull thud and Walter lies still.

I stare at the sprawled unconscious man as the magpies take flight again, from the roof above, and their shadows ripple across the back of his faded cloth suit.

'Did we win?' asks the shape next to Faelan.

And I can't believe my eyes as Rolant, hat intact, steps from the shadows into the light.



As three figures find their way across fields, one on another's back, my thoughts seem to follow them as a spectator, sensing how something has almost burnt through me.

In China there is a legend about a man, Lord Ye, who idolised dragons. In admiration, he obsessively drew them everywhere. Then one day a real dragon appeared to him and he immediately died of fear.

I recall a wavering hand on a postcard to Ri, how my foolish former self wished for some adventure, big news to tell. Now here was my wish and I feel it like devouring flames. And I will Rolant to carry me back to the field where we first met, somehow place me down there, safely in an old life.

Yet when I try to recall that life, it has already started to fall away. My small bedroom in Llwynypia fades, Rhosyn too, her face pales and disappears like ink left in the sun. Instead I see Walter's lips muttering in German, lifting the gun. In sobering daylight, playing through hedgerows, I find myself mouthing Kizette's echoing words: *years of planning*. But *who* was planning? Walter? My mind aches and slips in and out of a dull humming sound. I imagine him drawing in the dark, carving the deep, dark lines of the swastika over and over. Yet I also envision him backing away from the screaming spirit in the tunnel, terrified as I was, as it runs right through him.

My arms hold tight to Rolant's shoulders. I hear his rapid breath, feel him running and carrying me as though I am only a backpack in his own adventure. Faelan is singing somewhere, stuttering and forgetting words. There is the smell of wet grass and the sound of the trees stirring. Yet everything but thoughts feel only half there, transparent, as distant as a blurred horizon.

After a time, I hear the crunch of gravel beneath us, feel Rolant's body sink and adjust. There is a vague shape ahead, blurring as though it is nothing more than a drawing splashed with water.

'Morning Faelan!' says an unfamiliar voice. 'Morning Rol—oh! What's that on your back? Is it a baby? Is that your daughter? What's her name?'

'Do we have time to talk Toby?' Rolant's voice can be heard saying matter-of-factly. 'Or are we hurrying because she hasn't had dinner or supper or breakfast?'

'Oh! It's not safe to treat your baby like that!'

'Is being polite to you slowing us down?' he says, without breaking his stride. 'Can we ignore you now? Because we're in a hurry to get to Dryslwyn?'

'But—' the puzzled voice is calling back, already well behind us now. 'But don't forget to feed your baby or the services will take it away!'

We race on until we are swallowed in the shadow of a large house. Then Faelan's voice is stuttering in and out, waves of agitated discussion, something about wiping feet or taking 'very dirty' shoes off. Rolant is insisting he won't touch someone's feet and their voices go on and on until, with a jolt, I feel myself dropped.

I can't have fallen more than a few inches but my whole body throbs, feels so heavy, like a monstrous sack of rice Baba once dragged home for Mama because it was too heavy to lift. Sure enough, I feel the drag of my clothes as I too am pulled

across a cold floor. There is some commotion around my feet, voices bickering as I stare blearily up into the cobwebbed ceiling fan.

Eventually my shoes are removed and then I feel a cool glass being pressed to my lips. Somewhere behind me, cupboards slam open and closed, utensils clink and clatter.

‘Soup,’ Rolant is saying to Faelan, ‘ill people can only eat soup, can’t they?’

‘She n-not ill! Just *o-overtired*. What time does she go to bed?’

‘How long will the soup be?’

‘What t-time?’

‘Where is the soup?’

‘Is, is it after eight? N-Nine?’

‘What kinds of soup do you have? Do you have cream of chicken?’

‘She sh-should go to bed early!’

‘Are you doing good listening about the soup? Are you being helpful? Or irritating?’

‘Chickens don’t make cr-cream! So you’re irir—ur—urmat-ing.’

‘*Irritating*. You said it wrong, didn’t you?’

While this goes on, I feel my chest grow steadily colder. At first I think my state is worse than imagined, that I am slowly dying as they continue to argue about the soup. I then realise that Rolant, in his distraction, has slowly been tilting the glass too far, pouring water down my front.

‘Rolant?’

He stares at my face intently, then the long dark trail down my front, then back at my face again.

‘You’re okay,’ I croak, taking the glass from him and drinking deeply. ‘When I lost you I thought...’

‘But aren’t I never lost? Even in the dark? Don’t I have hyperthymesia? Don’t people with hyperthymesia never forget things? Like the way back?’

‘Hyper-what? But what about the smoke?’

‘Did you breathe in the smoke? Did you not listen to the adverts about smoke giving you cancer and tumours as big as boiled eggs?’

‘Right,’ I blink, trying to take it all in. ‘So you didn’t need the map, once you’d looked at it? You could have given it back to Walter; that’s what he was after. But I suppose then we’d have no proof that he...’

But looking at Rolant now, I’m reminded of the face of the little spirit girl at the grave. I almost forgot. An ugly feeling settles in the pit of my stomach. How will I tell Rolant?

‘Walter already has a m-map,’ Faelan says, not looking up from what she is feverishly mixing.

‘What?’ I say and manage to slowly lift myself, just enough to slide my aching body into a nearby wooden chair. I use the kitchen table to hold my balance and prop myself gratefully against it.

‘Can you wait here?’ Rolant says, as though he hasn’t just seen me ungraciously crawl into my current position.

He disappears into the next room and Faelan comes to sit with me. She slides a glass of poorly mixed pink liquid, sloshing it so that most ends up across the table.

‘What’s this?’

‘Pink m-m-ilkshake,’ says Faelan.

I take a sip, expecting strawberry or raspberry, but immediately understand why she has called it ‘pink’; it is flavourless.



‘Toby scr-screams if you put things in his mouth,’ explains Faelan. ‘He doesn’t l-like things that taste salty or sw-sweet, or if they taste hot or crunchy, or if they are d-dry or sticky. And he also hates: ch-chocolate or vanilla, f-f-fruit or anything round, spicy things, anything green or yellow, anything orange...’

Faelan continues to list Toby’s preferences until I am certain why he exists solely on ‘pink milkshake’; it is in fact the exact flavour and texture of nothing.

‘Walter thought Faelan took the map, without asking,’ says Rolant, returning and interrupting Toby’s diet saga. ‘Because you took Kizette without asking, didn’t you?’

‘She told me to! H-Her fault!’ Faelan says, pointing at me. ‘W-Walter was v-very angry! Told me to give the m-map back! I said I didn’t take it. Never seen it!’

‘But he didn’t believe you, did he? So he got this?’

He slides a slim dark book onto the table, narrowly missing a vein of milkshake. There is no title on the front cover, only a black symbol. Circular and resembling a wheel, it has jagged cracks emerging from it as though once made of glass and then smashed at its centre.

‘What is it?’ I ask, opening the cover.

I look up and find Faelan has suddenly brought her finger to her lips.

‘Didn’t Walter break the rules and not use kind hands?’ Rolant says, in a strangely firm voice, not quite his own. ‘*If you see something, say something.*’

The finger slowly comes from her lips, her large lopsided eyes bulging mournfully. ‘W-Walter’s book. Said it was proof the m-map was *his* so I had to give it b-back! O-or get it back before K-Kizette made me very sorry.’

Inside a title reads in bold, menacing print: The Dragon and the Sun. Below it there is smaller gothic lettering, all in German. Only one phrase stands out in what appears a brief list of alternative prints: The Black Sun.

What was it Kizette said to Walter? ‘*Prepare for the Black Sun,*’ I mutter.

I hastily flick several pages ahead to an index of pictures where the strange symbol appears again several times. Continuing, there are pages of mathematical calculations, triangles and diagrams. After these come dozens of engravings, monochrome block prints of angels and suns, dragons with multiple heads. Then suddenly something familiar: the map of the caves. Though it has none of the little scribbled markers, including the carousel, it is unmistakably of the same place.

‘How?’ I say, turning the book in my hands, trying to guess how old it must be.

And as I turn it, the page folds out, doubling the map in size. This one depicts shapes below, deeper underground.

‘What is that?’ I say pointing to it, tracing the strange dark shape.

Rolant and Faelan both lean in, staring into it with me. A pitch black circle emanates paler lines, is surrounded by further jagged ones. According to the illustration, it exists just beneath the lowest cavern.

‘Is that really down there?’ says Rolant.

‘Well,’ comes the voice from the open doorway. Craddock steps into the kitchen, her eyes fixed upon the book. ‘Now that... that is a matter of opinion.’

\*

‘Where have you been?’ she hisses, as soon as she is sure it is Erich at the mouth of the cave. ‘You promised to be back before dark.’

‘There was trouble,’ he replies but says no more.

Aderyn lights the candle and sees the sweat running in glistening trails down his temples. He is breathing hard, a sheep carcass across his stained shoulders.

There was a time when he would have carried it like nothing; now it seems like the weight of a man.

‘What’s that?’ she gasps, the light illuminating the shotgun. ‘You weren’t seen, were you?’

He ignores her questions, sidling past. ‘Hold this,’ he says, pressing it into her hand and shifting the weight of the sheep.

‘But where—’

‘I found it,’ he says impatiently, ‘it is not loaded.’

He steps ahead and something rattles audibly in his trouser pocket.

‘Erich?’

‘It’s not loaded anymore,’ he says, then his voice hardens: ‘bring the candle.

*Now.*’

They struggle through the dark passages, stopping now and then for Erich to catch his breath or consult her copy of the map. Several times they pause at a tunnel because Erich hears activity in the passage ahead. He curses in German. Aderyn waits while he sets down the body of the sheep, leans against the wall and searches again for an alternate route. When she struggles to hold the candlelight steady, he curses her too.

‘Can you not follow this one command?’ he sighs at last, removes a cigarette from his breast pocket and lights it in the trembling flame.

‘Sorry Erich.’

‘You fail me,’ he says.

‘But I—’

‘My *last* cigarette,’ he says reproachfully and turns away from her. ‘I go out and I bring back what is needed.’ He lands a sharp kick in the sheep’s side and a dark blood oozes from its neck. ‘You fail the cause.’

His face remains in shadow and smoke curls slowly around him. Aderyn watches as one bloodied hand irritably massages the nape of his neck.

He has changed, she catches herself thinking. Since going into hiding, it is as though all the softness, all the sunshine has gone out of him. But of course a place like *this* would do that to a man, too much darkness all the time, the emptiness and the echoes.

‘We are avoiding so many tunnels now,’ she says as he extinguishes half the cigarette against the wall and pockets it again. With a grunt, he loads the carcass on his back and walks on. ‘Is it really so dangerous?’ she calls after him, trying to shine the candlelight over his shoulder. ‘This way feels *terribly* far.’

‘Would you rather fall in a hole?’ he replies sharply.

‘No.’

‘Then keep your mouth shut and the light at our feet,’ he snaps.

‘Yes Erich,’ she says. ‘I was only thinking of our son. Just because he was born down here doesn’t mean he likes being left alone such a long time.’

‘He has his toys, does he not?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘Then he will not want you,’ he shifts the carcass agitatedly, ‘not until he is hungry. *Now be quiet!*’

They carry on in silence, stopping only a few times more before reaching the familiar central cavern. There, Erich lets the sheep fall and then collapses directly on his bedroll. He pulls the shells from his pockets and they clink to the floor.

‘Skin the animal like I taught you,’ he says, tossing her the small soiled blade from his belt. ‘I will take a lamp up to the radio then finish the rest.’

She uses her candle to light two more in the wall. 'Will you make any more *sueler* lamps,' she says hopefully. 'Only we don't have many candles left and I would like—'

'Solar! It is a *solar* lamp. I risk charging only enough outside for my work; I do not care what you would like.' He spits. 'Water!' And he turns his back to her: 'Just get me water.'

'Yes, Erich.'

The little boy is already sleeping soundly in his pile of blankets when she eventually returns. His soft breathing and low snores echo around the cavern.

She turns the wheel of the carousel sulkily, watching the dancing shadows of the animals parade across the walls, up and down.

Perhaps Erich was right after all and their ghostly little son hardly missed her. He had his toys, his meals left ready. Indeed, it was approaching two years since he was born here, grown increasingly satisfied to just sit with a doll instead of her. It was as though his toys adopted him, become a more pleasing family. Now he was starting to talk, she was certain she even overheard him speaking to them.

*He will not want you.*

Erich's words nettle her so that she has half a mind to shake their ungrateful little son awake. She starts towards him but slows and stops, imagining how cross Erich will be if the crying disturbs his work, his skulking about the tunnels, measuring radiation and God knows what else. She has her duties too: taking down numbers on the steam dials, listening out for the voices of his friends on the radio. Perhaps, it is just as well the little wretch remain occupied... learnt not to miss her.

Certainly he seemed quite indifferent whenever she returned from her stays in the village with Mrs Roberts. She would be gone at least a night or two, stomaching as much steamed pudding as she could before dropping in on better cooks in exchange for news from London. Though truthfully of course, she hadn't set foot there once since being first evacuated.

*'Oh the bombings are just terrible. Yes, Mother is much better now thank you. They might even save her other leg. No, she still has trouble remembering who we are but the doctors say that it still might come back to her yet. Daddy? Yes, he is managing, still doing his protected work at the factory, such a pity about catching his hand in that machine but we'll get by somehow...'*

The bumpkins would lap all these lies up, take pity on her and load her up 'for London' with just about anything they could spare. And she could pocket anything else they wouldn't miss and then say her goodbyes for another month or two, dodge the train, and return to her real family here. And if this family had not missed her, it was because they were necessarily occupied.

Without her, Erich was forced to man the special radio alone. Every night he would climb up to the highest ledge, the one opening up like an attic window onto the night sky, and sit there listening. They would speak English sometimes, so as not to draw attention, sometimes code. His hopes seemed to soar in those moments, his usual reserve cracking in a kind of giddy hysteria, just hearing the voices of his brothers. But the news would always be to wait, to be patient. And his mood would wither. He got so cross and impatient with everything now...

With a jolt she remembers he'd wanted water. She hurries back the way she came, ducking into an adjacent passage. Hastily crawling through, she slides the candle carefully along ahead of her, concentrating so it is not extinguished. Erich will scold her if she wastes any more of his matches.

Eventually she reaches the waterfall and swings out the old tin canteen where it has been left to cool in the bubbling water. She draws it up and screws the lid closed, pauses to take a few mouthfuls with her hands, before heading back to Erich.

By the time she reaches the highest cavern, her skin is prickling with sweat. She steps out of the passage, about to call up to him. But something in the voice travelling down, its excited tone, causes her to grow very still.

‘Ja? Ja! Ja... *Ja, ja!*’ he repeats.

A voice on the receiving end is responding, various code numbers, and then the words swing in and out of English and German as though the radio is trapped between two channels. Soon Erich is thanking them, in both languages, over and over again. Then, a pause. The radio is silent and Erich is... laughing? She listens to its foreign intonation, undulating and light. And the more she does, the more she suspects the truth. She has never known him to be happy, truly happy like this before. *She* has never made him truly happy. She frowns, deeply.

Eventually comes the sound of his descent. Increasingly, the white glow of the clean solar light eclipses her feeble candlelight, until his two large boots appear. He drops down with a thud, straightens, the radio under one arm and the lamp swinging from the other.

He is not surprised to see her. On the contrary, he throws back his head laughing and swings her about by the waist, blowing out the candle, snatching and throwing it over his shoulder.

She follows with difficulty as he practically dances his way down the passages, light swinging in all directions. The heavy canteen cuts at her waist and she wishes he would stop to drink at least some of it.

‘Erich?’ she calls after him. ‘Wait for me! *Erich?* What’s happened?’

But he just laughs and laughs, the sound doubling through the tunnels and it is all she can do to keep up with him and not be abandoned in the darkness.

When he eventually stops, it is in the cavern with his bedroll again. He immediately begins rummaging through his research papers and diaries, bringing out a manila folder and stuffing pieces inside.

‘Erich, what are you doing?’

He considers two papers, retrieves a pen from within the folds of his blanket. Hurriedly, he begins scrawling signatures across the bottom of one.

‘*Erich!*’

He suddenly looks up, stares as though he has only just remembered she is there.

‘Well?’ she says, forcing a smile, swallowing the rising fear like bile.

He just shrugs, returns to ordering the papers, checking and double checking the signatures, adding dates.

‘You’re leaving,’ she realises slowly. ‘Aren’t you?’

He doesn’t respond, still engrossed in the papers, getting up and hurrying out. She races after him, trying to take his arm but he simply wrenches it away.

He goes on through the dark and she follows like no more than a ghost, until he is so quick, almost running, lamplight swinging in all directions, that she has to stop to catch her breath.

When she catches up to him, he is already in the playroom. For a moment she imagines he is there for their son, but he simply strides past the sleeping boy like he is no more than one of the dolls.

She watches as he slides a key out from the leg of his boot and begins unlocking the drawer in the small wooden desk.

‘You told me that drawer was jammed,’ she says quietly, more to herself.  
‘Erich, what is going on?’

He begins removing unfamiliar items: ration books, money, forged identity papers, bundling them hastily under his arm.

‘You’re not just going to *leave*?’ she says incredulously. ‘Not tonight!’ she laughs. But the sound catches in her throat when he just shrugs a second time. ‘Erich!’ she says, losing patience. ‘Whatever your orders, we must come with you at once. You have arranged it, haven’t you? You must think of your family.’

‘I am.’

‘I mean us. *We* are your family now.’

He laughs. ‘Have I not made you enough company?’ he says, gesturing at the toys. ‘You are a child Aderyn. You belong here, with your toys.’ He sighs, shakes his head, begins closing the drawer. ‘I am a soldier; I have a war to fight.’

‘And your son?’ she says, her voice suddenly growing shrill, ‘what have you decided for *him*?’

‘The boy is not...’ he gives another laugh, this one small, cold. ‘No. He talks to dolls. Talks to himself. I think he is not my son,’ he says curtly, as though discarding a used bicycle in a ditch. ‘I think you are mistaken.’

‘Mistaken?’ she repeats faintly. ‘Mistaken...’

‘You are mistaken.’

‘*Mistaken.*’

He places the folder in the drawer, snaps it shut and places the key on top.

‘You cannot just leave!’

‘And who will stop me?’ he says, laughing, his arms wide and gesturing, the light swinging and illuminating the dark blood on them. ‘You expect me to stay down here? Live like an animal in a hole! Others will come to finish the work I have started.’ His voice lowers, suddenly stern. ‘And when they do come, do not be here Aderyn.’

‘Why not?’ she says defiantly, the prickling heat in her skin now increasing with rage. ‘Why must *I* not be here?’

‘They will kill you.’

He begins striding from the room.

‘I helped you!’ she says, seizing his arm, not letting go when he tries to shake her off again. ‘I helped *them*!’

‘Yes, yes...’ he sighs and takes her face in his hands. The once mysterious blue of his eyes now a rigid gaze, boring into hers. ‘You are a traitor to your own people.’ The fingers press into her cheeks. ‘But do not mistake you are a friend to mine.’

She plants her hands firmly over his: ‘Why are you saying this? Why!’ Her voice breaks, eyes smarting with tears. ‘What about your promises? You said—*you told me you loved me ERICH!*’ The words fade to nothing as they echo away through the caves. Their eyes remain locked for a moment. ‘Or are you the traitor?’

His hands wrench away from hers and he pushes her roughly aside, stepping to the mouth of the passage and pausing for a moment, his back to her. ‘Leave the boy Aderyn,’ he says curtly, as though giving advice to a fellow officer. ‘Run. If you still wish to live... run.’ He gives her one, last decisive look over his shoulder. ‘This is the only way you will survive our war.’

He ducks out of sight and his fading footsteps begin to disappear. There is a strange ringing, resounding above the silence of the cave. Somewhere there is a popping static, increasing—the radio? No. She feels it must be in her head. Because it follows her, as she follows him. Or rather, it is there when she feels her way back to the cavern with his bed and retrieves a candle, the shells from the floor, and the gun.

It feels as though it is the sound which she follows when she pursues him through the dark. And when she cuts him off at the pass, where he is bent collecting supplies, points the gun at his chest, the white noise seems to fill her entirely.

‘Aderyn? What are you doing? Stop this now!’

He dodges away, runs from her, she follows. The tunnels pop and wind. Somehow they end up back in the cavern with the waterfall. She points again.

‘Aderyn, stop this! Are you mad?’

‘I was *mistaken*,’ she murmurs.

And he lunges forwards, meaning to take the gun from her. But instead there is a deafening explosion of sound. One numb finger quivers at the trigger as he falls back into the water.

It turns red.

She stands staring, watching as everything, every trace, slowly washes away in the cold blue, illuminated by the sinking lamp, until that fades too and she stands in the dark.

‘M-Mummy?’ stammers a voice at her back.

‘Go back to bed,’ she says without turning, ‘go back to sleep.’

‘Father?’

‘Go back to bed,’ she says, letting the gun fall from her hands, land empty at her feet.

With a hiss, she lights one of Erich’s matches, pulls a candle from the breast pocket of her shirt. In its glow, she drifts towards one of the passage openings.

‘Mummy?’

‘Go and play with your toys Walter,’ she says, her voice gradually shrinking away along with the light.

‘Mummy! Mummy!’

But there is no reply as she disappears.

‘*Bad!*’ comes the strident voice at Walter’s chest.

He clutches the doll tightly, as the last of the candle’s glow disappears into the tunnel.

‘*Bad, bad Mother...*’ says Kizette.

\*

‘So, you’re a part of this too.’ I rest my hand on the black circle. ‘Seems like you all are.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ Craddock replies, closing the kitchen door.

‘I don’t think so,’ I say. ‘Not anymore.’

‘Did you wipe your feet?’ says Rolant, almost menacingly.

‘Rolant and Faelan, why don’t you go upstairs and let us talk,’ Craddock says with a false smile. ‘We have a lot to say to each other.’

‘Dryslwyn is mine and Toby’s house,’ says Rolant, ‘so can’t we decide?’

‘This is my house Rolant!’ Craddock snaps suddenly. ‘*All* the houses are mine. So be a good boy and take her upstairs.’

‘D-don’t shout!’ Faelan shouts. ‘D-don’t like shouting. Kind words!’

‘Then go upstairs!’

‘Why?’ says Rolant.

He steps in front of us, seeming to grow in size, his shoulders suddenly broader, strong. Craddock eyes him uncertainly.

‘Tell us about the Black Sun,’ I say, ‘that’s what this is all about, isn’t it?’ And I hold up the book. ‘This?’

‘Put that down! Do you have any idea—’ Craddock takes a step forwards but so does Rolant.

‘Is it real?’ I ask, meeting her gaze as it travels the three of us.

She thinks for a moment and then through gritted teeth replies: ‘More real than any of you could understand. And there’s not a thing you can do to stop it. This will be *Endsieg*.’

‘Stop it?’ echoes Rolant.

‘You are unworthy,’ she snarls, ‘hand over the book. How dare you even touch it!’

‘So it’s *yours*?’ I say slowly.

‘N-no, Walter’s!’ Faelan shouts, shaking her head. ‘In his room.’

‘But I suppose you’d both need a copy of the map,’ I say, ‘if you’re working together.’

Craddock’s eyes dart from one of us to the next. I know it can only be so long before she makes her move.

‘All those books in his room,’ I continue, watching Craddock’s reaction carefully, ‘they’re yours too, aren’t they?’

Something flickers in her eyes.

‘Why are you keeping books in Walter’s room?’ says Rolant.

‘Whatever is in this book, she doesn’t want to be caught with it,’ I say. ‘You don’t want to be caught doing anything—that’s why Walter’s doing it all for you.’

‘But not too well I see,’ says Craddock.

‘It was *you*,’ I say slowly, ‘down in the cave with the music box. Two maps—you and Walter. The only ones who could find their way down there.’

‘Not the only ones,’ says Craddock, her eyes on Rolant now.

Rhosyn’s words, a piece that doesn’t fit, surfaces. What was it she said? *Carn go down there... not with’im Dilys*.

‘And what about Rhosyn? And Dilys?’

Craddock’s head jerks as though she has been slapped. ‘What has Walter been saying to you?’

‘Not Walter,’ I say.

Her head jerks again. ‘So, you’ve seen them.’

‘Them?’ I repeat, confused. But something in her eyes brings the truth to the surface. ‘Yes, I have seen the two girls, their ghosts. Was that something else Walter did for you?’

‘Two girls?’ says Rolant. ‘Two... *ghosts*?’

I look at him, open my mouth but find no words come out. The image of the spirit in the broken mask lingers in memory.

‘I could let you go,’ Craddock laughs, a hollow laugh, echoing inside as though parts of her have been worn away, ‘but you’d only keep interfering. The air down there makes you see some funny things. Three foxes poisoned, quite dead when I threw down the bodies. But down there, I’ve seen them again. Only now, they’re up here too. It’s spreading. Soon everyone will be seeing everything. *Everything that shouldn’t be seen*. All our special handling is waking up. So it’s time.’

The pistol slides from her jacket, hooked in one quivering hand. She points the dark opening at Rolant: ‘You are going to give me that book.’

Suddenly the kitchen door opens, startling everyone and hitting Craddock.

‘I’ve come to check on the baby!’

Rolant rushes forwards as Craddock, stunned, turns with the pistol.

‘That’s dangerous!’ Toby manages to cry as Rolant pulls him roughly aside and down.

Startled, Toby falls against the counter and lowers himself into a crouching position, squatting there like a frog, eyes bulging.

‘Stay where you are!’ shouts Craddock, back to the wall and pointing the pistol wildly. ‘All of you! Don’t move!’

‘Shall I come back later?’ Toby offers.

‘*Shut up!*’ hisses Craddock. ‘Just *shut up*. Do you know how long I’ve had to endure you loons? *Lebensunwertes leben!*’ She lets out a scream of frustration, her free hand clamping the red part of her forehead where the door struck. Eyes narrowing, she snarls: ‘My Erich may be gone but tonight I finish the work he started. This will be the last night I endure on a farm of overdue mercy killings! Oh, there were real farms for your kind once...’ glaring she points the pistol at each of us in turn, ‘and you’ll be in them again soon enough. Now,’ and she directs the pistol at Rolant, her voice low: ‘*get that book.*’

He stares at the weapon blankly.

‘What? Don’t think I’ll use it?’ says Craddock. ‘You should have learnt already that I won’t hesitate to do what’s necessary to prevent meddling. Gas and little girls can be tricky but I assure you,’ she points the gun at his head, ‘my bullets rarely miss their mark.’

‘Gas?’ Rolant echoes. ‘Is that... what happened to Elen?’

‘Not so slow after all then,’ sniggers Craddock. ‘You two should have stayed out of Erich’s caves. But why don’t you get our book and I’ll tell you *exactly* what happened to your sister. Don’t you want to know? After all these years? I’ll take you to her Rolant. I’ll show you exactly what happened. *No more questions*. First, the book.’

He obeys in a series of slow movements. When I close the book and hand it to him, our eyes meet for a moment. I try to know what he’s thinking. I try to reach in and see, find something beyond the blood starting to pound in my ears. But there is only my own dread. There is nothing to be thought or said. There is only blood, beating its mysterious rhythm.

‘We’re going to leave now,’ Craddock says, shoving Rolant towards the door. ‘Me, my map, and,’ she points the gun to Rolant’s head, ‘*my other map.*’

‘B-B-But—,’ Faelan begins.

‘*Shut up!* And if any of you try to follow,’ Craddock snarls, ‘or try anything else... there’ll be one more ghost to see down in those caves.’

\*

The kitchen is silent for what seems a very long time after the door swings closed behind Craddock and Rolant. Faelan continues to stare at the space where they once stood, as though their bodies have left some visible impression in the wall.

It is Toby who speaks first, voice timid and eyes shining: ‘W-What should we do now?’

‘Nothing,’ one of us says.

And I realise a moment later it was me, or something like me, answering of its own will. ‘There’s nothing *we* can do,’ I say.

Toby shifts uneasily, then mumbles: ‘I don’t think Rolant wanted to go with her.’

‘I know that!’ I reply, more harshly than I mean to.

He stands, opening his wide mouth several more times to say something but closing it each time.

‘What is it?’ I mutter, looking away, in the direction of the high window where only treetops are visible. ‘What else is there to say now?’



Somewhere, out there, Rolant is alone and being marched towards the terrible meaning hidden in Craddock's echoing words. *I'll take you to her Rolant. I'll show you exactly what happened. No more questions.* Does Rolant understand she means to show history by repeating it? I think of the little girl in the gas mask. *Gas and little girls can be tricky...*

And I think with bitterness how I said nothing, just handed him the book.

'If you see something,' says Toby, 'say something.'

'Rolant says that too,' I say, tears of frustration pricking my eyes. 'Does it even mean anything?'

'It means not to keep things in here,' Toby says and I look up to see him pointing at his head. 'Or in here,' he says, pointing to his heart. 'You have to use your words.'

I swallow hard. 'How?'

'We should tell?' Toby suggests.

'Who can we tell? She said if we tried—'

'The policewoman,' says Toby.

'Policewoman?'

'She has b-b-big hair and a hat with a shield on it,' states Faelan.

'And smells like medicine,' nods Toby. 'She asked us all where Rolant and Mee-hoo were. Miss Craddock said you weren't missing, the woman at the pub should *mind her own business*, but then the policewoman said she better *produce you then*. And then the policewoman said Mee-hoo's brother *hadn't spoken to her either and demanded to know where she—*'

'She's called Mee-h-h-how,' says Faelan.

'*Miao*,' I say, only half listening anymore.

So the police are already involved? How much do they know or believe? My mind is racing, guessing what they have told Ri.

'You're not really a baby, are you *Miao*?' Toby says doubtfully. 'But I saw Rolant carrying you like one. Were you playing pretend? Rolant doesn't like to pretend. He only likes true things.'

'I was hurt,' I recall faintly.

Toby stares. 'You look heavy. I think that was dangerous. Especially if there was running. Running with heavy things is dangerous.'

'Yes,' I say, 'but... he did it anyway.'

And I blink at the brightness of truth in this. Then looking from Toby to Faelan, I find both staring back intently as though awaiting orders. My mind stops racing; the time has to be now. Without any maps of the cave left, they must be stopped before they reach it.

'I have to go after him,' I say. 'And one of you has to tell someone where I have gone and why.'

'I'm good at t-telling,' Faelan says quickly, 'and drawing pictures of what happened and making shapes of how I felt about it w-w-with clay.'

As she says all this, arms locked at her sides, she resembles even more now a sturdy stump, the knotted face crusted with its bark of dried blood. Though hurt in the fight with Walter, she appears indifferent to the danger as if facing it were her natural work. I somehow trust her to gain attention, the attention of a person ready to listen and not immediately assume lies.

'Go straight to Addfwyn at The Red Dragon pub,' I say.

'The woman who should *mind her own business*?' says Toby.

And I am suddenly very glad for Addfwyn, glad she *is* in this business.

‘Addfwyn will call back the policewoman. Tell her she was right; Craddock did know where we were and has now taken Rolant at gunpoint. She should know Walter is in this too. Send help,’ I tell her, ‘I will try and stop them before they get too far.’

Even as I speak the words, I am doubting what I can do alone. Thinking of the book, the map, everything pointing to the reach of Craddock’s secrets, my courage shrinks and evaporates like water in the white hot sun. I lean forwards, running the cool back of my hand across tired eyes. And I feel something crease against my chest—the envelope.

Why did I take it from the cave? Thinking my way back to that dark place, somewhere deep below us, I hastily pull the envelope from my coat, hoping Rolant hasn’t already begun the descent into it.

‘Here,’ I say quickly, giving it to Faelan. ‘Give this to the policewoman. It’s from the cave in Crythor Forest. I think that’s where Craddock is going, for The Black Sun.’

I can only hope they will know what *that* means. But will they? And how am I to stop it?

‘What should *I* do?’ asks Toby.

‘I think you should go with Faelan?’

‘I run faster on my own,’ says Faelan, screwing up her nose and starting to pull her wellingtons on. ‘Toby is sl-slow.’

‘Rolant is *my* friend,’ insists Toby. ‘I will run very, very fast after him,’ he says and, after a pause for consideration, adds: ‘and carry you on my back even if you’re really heavy.’

How can I persuade Toby, in his meek raincoat and Velcro shoes, of the larger dangers lying ahead, the greater forces working against us? Yet, seeing the determined expression, I know he understands friendship, loyalty. Even now he has moved to the window, started looking out, perhaps thinking Rolant can still be seen from it like a tiny figure inked on a fading horizon.

I remember abruptly how it is to look from windows, waiting for someone who is not coming back; I spent years waiting for Baba. They were always visions of somewhere else, the same scenes of him returning, laughing about *some mistake*, some *chance* which has brought him back rather than taken him away forever. I can’t just leave Toby here feeling that wondering emptiness.

Faelan has finally got both wellingtons on and I join Toby at the window. Outside there is nothing but the blank stretch of a gravel driveway, static as a picture. But I notice a line is glistening, running the curve of Toby’s cheek.

‘We’ll get him back Toby,’ I manage, trying to sound certain.

‘Elen never came back,’ says Toby quietly, eyes fixed. ‘Rolant listens to the news every day. But they don’t even talk about his sister coming back anymore.’

‘Rolant *is*,’ I say, reaching inside myself for some assurance, something to ground these words in. I find only a small reserve of hope, at the bottom of what seems a very deep well in the bottom of my stomach. ‘We’ll need a torch Toby, for the cave,’ I add, sickened by even the thought of going down there again.

‘There’s one in the stair cupboard full of spiders,’ he says and immediately shuffles away to retrieve it.

‘Give the envelope straight to the policewoman, nobody else,’ I tell Faelan as she swings the door open.

‘What does c-cons-cone—,’ she squints at the word printed on the envelope and turns it to face me.

‘*Confidential*,’ I read. ‘It means we should not open it.’

‘Why not?’ she says, turning it over curiously in her stubby brown fingers.  
‘What’s i-in it?’

‘Just take it to the policewoman!’ I say, holding the door impatiently.

‘D-don’t you want to l-l-look first?’ presses Faelan.

Toby returns, a yellow plastic torch swinging from a cord around his wrist.

‘She doesn’t want to l-l-look in the brown l-letter!’ she tells him.

‘We just can’t,’ I say, pulling my own dead torch from my coat pocket and watching it roll and grow steadily still in the centre of the table.

‘But why? Why n-not?’ Faelan says, giving the lip of the envelope a quick sniff.

‘What’s in it?’ Toby wants to know. ‘Why aren’t we looking? Is it dangerous?’

‘*Because*,’ I say, the true reason forming at the same time as the words to explain it: ‘this could be too big for *us*. And if I learn even one more thing about it, I won’t go! I won’t go after Rolant. I won’t be brave enough.’ My voice catches. ‘And we’ll never see him again.’

Silence meets the final few words. Toby, who was swinging the torch on his wrist, grips it. I think for a moment he will cry again. Instead, he hurries over to Faelan, pushes the envelope closer to her then begins pushing her roughly through the door chanting: ‘Don’t open the envelope, don’t open the envelope, don’t open the envelope, don’t...’

Stunned, but nodding reluctant agreement, Faelan’s head disappears from sight. We listen to her footsteps, now surprisingly light and quick as a fox’s, dancing across the gravel before fading into nothing.

Lightheaded, I reach for the last of the pink milkshake, bringing it to my lips, hand trembling. I turn away to finish, hoping Toby hasn’t seen my fear.

‘That’s okay,’ he says, almost immediately.

‘Toby I’m really not...’ I mean to say: *a brave person*. Even the words collapse and shrink back inside.

‘It’s okay,’ he says again.

‘No, no it’s not,’ I say, finally accepting that I am wasting time.

I am still stalling. I am too afraid to go after Craddock, too afraid to go back into the forest, too afraid to do anything. And too ashamed to even face Toby now.

‘It’s okay,’ he repeats.

‘Is it?’ I say, then wonder shamefacedly if this is just a phrase he has been taught to say in crisis moments.

I turn but stare hard at the floor. If I stand like this long enough, he will know the truth. I don’t want to see his eyes when he realises it is not just the envelope I am too afraid to do anything about.

‘It’s okay,’ says Toby, ‘you can have my milkshake without asking.’

I look up in surprise and find he has been staring at the glass, likely the whole time.

‘You’re Rolant’s friend,’ he says, meeting my gaze to add: ‘and mine.’

I can’t help but smile as I slide the glass onto the table.

‘You are right,’ I say, reminded now of when I first found the map of the tunnels inside Kizette and called Rolant *friend*. Hadn’t I told Rolant then that I was going to help? ‘Bring a can of the pink milkshake for Rolant,’ I say, ‘he might be thirsty when we find him.’

I cross to the door and Toby soon joins me there, a can stretching his breast pocket. I take the torch from him and, as we leave, he points at something leaning innocently in the umbrella rack: Walter’s shotgun.

The sight of it reminds me, with a stomach-turning jolt, that Rhosyn is dead... with Walter lying unconscious somewhere nearby. Thankfully, Faelan and Rolant must have brought the gun here, beyond his reach.

I hesitate for a moment, seeing it resting there, slick and deadly. My hand is reluctant to touch the cold form. Sliding it carefully from the rack, there is a glimpse of red warning the safety is off, that it can still strike. Is it good or bad fortune Craddock didn't see it, reclaim it for her side?

*Her side.*

Part of me hopes the magazine will be empty, that the last shot struck nothing but sky. I fumble with the safety until the red warning disappears. Surely it will be empty and useless now; we can leave it behind.

'Is that yours?' asks Toby. 'Do you need it?'

I pump the slide backwards and then forwards, just the way Walter did, and hear a shell load inside the chamber. I quickly place it back inside the rack.

'Do you need it?' repeats Toby.

I think again to take it, even reach out my hand. But then I remember the sound, how Rolant fell on the path to the graveyard, so still.

'No,' I reply, 'no I don't need it.'

\*

The forest echoes with the cawing of crows. As we hurry through the trees, Toby stumbling three paces behind me, I imagine we are tracking, on some trail Rolant has secretly left us.

'Faster Toby,' I hiss over my shoulder, struggling to move both quickly and unheard.

I try to weigh the value of speed against surprise but cannot trust either will help. How far ahead will they be now? Are they already at the caves? Is that truly where Craddock is headed?

Despite moving cautiously, birds still take flight into higher branches and squirrels leap and latch to trunks. Behind the sounds of the forest, I listen for Rolant and keep imagining some footprint or sign in every twitching fern and disturbed stone. I remember this as the path we took to Dragon's Teeth Cave before but will they take another? The one through Nyth Bran Chapel?

A haziness is settling around us, like the air dulling before a storm. The forest becomes increasingly grey, as though all colour is draining into the pitted earth. The sounds of the birds around us begin to dwindle. Shapes around us are growing vague, beginning to blur together, as though a great cloud is descending into the forest. We climb over the trunks of several felled trees and I recognise we are getting close.

The fox's bark sounds somewhere close ahead. I stop still. And it comes again, high and sharp. Then quiet.

'A fox!' says Toby breathlessly behind me.

'Out in the middle of the day?'

'Oh, but it's not,' he says, 'look!'

I turn and he is pointing above us. Through a gap in the treetops, the black disk hangs against a slate coloured sky.

'The moon?' says Toby.

'The sun!' I say, pointing further across. 'The Michaelmas eclipse.'

'Are we missing the festival?' says Toby, disappointed. 'We haven't got our pinhole viewers! We're going to miss the sun going black.'

'A black sun...'

Even as we stare, the shadow appears to deepen, the atmosphere steadily saturated by hues of ash.

‘We have to go,’ I say, ‘*now*.’

Through the hushed forest, a strange wind stirs. Birds quieten above us, their calls starting and stopping, slowing to nothing. Then the wind itself begins to die and soon leaves everywhere are still.

‘What’s happening?’ comes Toby’s voice.

But I just keep going, tracing the invisible path I am still trying to believe Rolant has somehow marked for us. A long shadow is steadily beginning to dissect it, widening like the black slice on a sun dial.

‘Almost there,’ I tell Toby, though likely too quietly for him to hear; I realise he is falling behind but I must press further on.

Ahead, are the trees with the rooks though none so much as stir now. All life in the forest is silent as I reach the clearing before the cave.

There is no sign of Craddock or Rolant, not even a footprint, though I could miss one easily now in the descended gloom. Are we too late?

Toby finally catches up, rushing next to me.

‘Bats,’ he says, breathlessly, ‘there are bats!’

‘Where?’

‘Behind m—’

Even as he speaks, the squeaking swarm appears, circling and blinking in and out of the clearing around us.

‘Dangerous!’ Toby cries, crouching down and covering his head.

Tiny forms dart around the trees, flitting nearer above our heads. Closer, they look more like embers of light flickering and disappearing.

‘Are they touching me?’ Toby says from the ground where he prostrates himself. ‘Don’t let them touch me!’

‘They’re just—’ I feel something strike my cheek, stinging and causing me to cry out in surprise.

Toby leaps up: ‘What?’

Something pulls through my hair and I catch a fragment of popping static. Staggering, I cover my head. But they are moving too quickly and all around us now, a whirlwind of squeaking and nipping.

‘Make them stop!’ Toby is saying next to me. ‘They’re shocking me!’

Electric shocks—these are the bats from the tunnels. But why are they here? As I glimpse Toby’s arms, waving manically, Craddock’s words ring in my ears again: *All the special handling is waking up*. Shielding my face, I remember the fox’s cry, fearing what else is now spreading from the cave.

Suddenly, one of the shapes collides with Toby’s hand in a fountain of tiny sparks. He screams and I try to reach out to him, catching one arm, but he immediately screams again.

‘Don’t touch me! I don’t like to be t—’

He is struck a second time, on the shoulder, and yelps in terror. Before I can stop him, he takes off in the direction of the cave mouth, arms spinning like a lopsided windmill.

‘Toby, wait!’

Head low, I follow him towards the opening. The swirl of bats begins to rise above, turning back to the trees, fading overhead. But Toby has already vanished.

‘Toby?’ I call between the jagged teeth of stone. ‘*Toby?*’

There is a screech as I stumble inside. I recoil from the path of something escaping, then watch the spectre of an owl vanish into the forest. Toby's footsteps are still echoing in the passage.

'Stop!' I shout after him, 'Toby!'

If Craddock is here, she will have heard us now but it doesn't matter with Toby running blindly ahead in the dark. With a jolt, I remember the deep pitfall.

He won't know it is there.

Hands shaking, I fumble in my coat for his torch. I pull it out and manage to flash it directly into my eyes. Dazed, I shine it into the dark, racing after him. But over the sound of my own footsteps, I can no longer hear his.

'Toby?' I call out.

But I know he is likely too afraid or too far into the cave now. I don't know how long I have been running when I hear the scream.

It sounds, not far ahead, echoing piercingly along the passage. I stop still, almost dropping the torch, ears straining. Has he fallen? Met Craddock?

I force myself to go on, the path becoming steadily narrower, struggling through sideways in parts.

Then I think I hear something stir just around a bend. I pause, becoming certain. I unsteadily bring the torch to my chest and turn it off. A dull scraping is feeding through the dark. And behind it there is the rise and fall of... laboured breathing.

Chest pounding, I dare to creep only a few paces, trying to silence my own shallow breathing, pressing myself to the cool rock. I must be close enough for them to be able to hear me too. Is it Toby? What if he is lying hurt, too afraid to call out to me?

'Toby?' I say hesitantly.

No answer.

'Toby?' I try a little louder.

'Who's there?' a voice hisses sharply.

Not Toby. The voice is no more than a whisper but I feel sure it isn't Craddock's either. With a sinking feeling, I wonder if it could be Walter. We left him, only stunned, in Rhosyn's driveway. Has he come looking for us now?

'Who's there?' the voice demands.

I am certain they are within sight, only a veil of darkness between us. Yet there is no way of knowing if I am standing inches from Toby or someone far more deadly.

'Down here!' a familiar voice cries.

I start at the closeness of it, almost falling backwards. But as the light dips, it illuminates—

'Rolant!'

'Are you supposed to shine torches in people's eyes?'

He is lying flat in the passage, both arms disappearing into it at the shoulder. Even as he squints up at me, another face appears below his.

'This is so dangerous!' Toby informs us.

'Toby! What happened?' I call, shining the torch down into the deep pit where Toby's toes dance against a narrow inner ledge.

'Can we pull him out now?' says Rolant.

Balancing the torch on the floor, I step across and wedge myself next to Rolant. I stretch down to take Toby's arm but he immediately pulls it away, swinging out wildly with a yelp. Dangling by only one arm, Rolant manages to catch onto it with his other hand too.

'Do you want to fall?' he winces.

‘Don’t-want-to-be-touched-don’t—,’ Toby says, incensed and with his body slipping.

‘You have to be!’ I say, reaching for him again. ‘Toby you’re going to fall!’

He rocks away with a cry as if my hand were a bat trying to shock him.

‘Toby!’ I scream as he slips again and Rolant just manages to catch him again by the wrists where he swings like a pendulum.

‘Would you rather fall? And get purple on your side?’ Rolant manages through gritted teeth. ‘Purple on every side? More sides than Hamilton?’

Something plummets, striking the walls of the passage as it goes, but revealing no bottom to it.

‘The milkshake!’ Toby cries sorrowfully, thrashing around.

Rolant strains to hold on but I can hear a low tearing—Toby’s sleeve.

‘No!’ Toby wails. ‘Don’t touch me! No!’

I realise with terror that he is now even trying to struggle free of Rolant.

‘He’s slipping!’

I dive across and grab his hand, pulling and shouting: ‘Pull Rolant! Pull!’ over Toby’s protests and the sound of material tearing. And Toby’s red face slowly reappears, smeared with grime and tears. ‘Keep pulling!’

I pull and pull, finding the great weight of one human incredible, twisting and prising my feet against the rock, blood rushing in my ears.

His flailing velcro shoes appear. He keeps kicking, even when he has fully surfaced, catching Rolant in the stomach several times.

‘You are out now!’ I try to tell him as he crawls unceremoniously over me, his kicks finding my ribs.

‘Shall I tell Hamilton you’re kicking?’ says Rolant, holding his stomach and looking as though he could throw Toby back down the hole.

‘You ripped my raincoat,’ Toby replies sourly.

I wipe my forehead with my sleeve and, leaning back against the tunnel, find that I am laughing.

‘What’s funny? Why are you laughing?’ asks Rolant, rubbing his arms.

‘Everything,’ I saw wearily, closing my tired eyes. ‘Everything is funny.’

‘This place isn’t funny,’ says Toby. ‘There are bats and places to fall and no lights on. It’s dangerous and I hate it.’

‘Are you supposed to run in the dark?’ says Rolant, getting up and retrieving the torch. ‘Or is that why you fell?’

‘They should have lights on or people will fall,’ mutters Toby.

‘Were you looking where you were going? Or did you step on me?’ says Rolant.

I get up slowly and dust myself, finding fresh bruises from the struggle.

‘I didn’t step on you! *You* tripped me! Because you were on the floor.’

‘Just don’t run away like that again,’ I tell Toby.

With a jolt, I remember why we are really here.

‘Where’s Craddock?’ I say suddenly.

Rolant stares at me for a moment, the torch light poised beneath his darkening jaw, the hollows of his eyes.

He then silently lowers it to the deep, dark rim of the hole.

‘She wasn’t looking where she was going either,’ his voice says quietly from the shadows.

My eyes travel down to where the light is filtering into the ground. Where does such a thing lead? I imagine it to be bottomless, a portal of timeless falling. Could Craddock still be falling, even now, further and further beneath us?

‘*Can we stop running?*’ Rolant is saying, his voice distant, as though disappearing into the hole after Craddock. ‘*Why can’t we slow down?*’

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ I tell him.

‘Why?’ Toby says unhelpfully. ‘Were those bats chasing you too?’

Rolant just keeps shining the torch where Craddock must have fallen, probably with a scream not unlike Toby’s.

Imagining the scene, I cannot decide whether Rolant reaches out a hand to save her. My mind plays it both ways, over and over: him reaching out, grabbing her, and then... letting her go? Or does his hand never leave his side? After all, he knows these caves, likely better than anyone. Did he know the entire time that they were heading for this? Keeping silent, until...

‘So did you see what happened to Elen?’ asks Toby. ‘Did she show you?’

My heart quickens in the silence. The torch hovers above the abyss.

‘Do people tell the truth?’ says Rolant eventually. ‘Or do they only pretend?’

I think how to answer this and find there is a stillness, nothing but the sound of our breathing in the dark. And it is strangely comforting not to speak, or think to speak, just become motionless in the moment.

‘Good,’ Toby says suddenly and the light travels from the hole to illuminate his face.

‘Good?’ repeats Rolant. ‘Lying? And throwing poison smoke at people?’ His voice goes low and adds, ‘at Elen?’

‘Good, good, good!’ he says, shaking his head with increasing confidence, the more he repeats the word. ‘Craddock was dangerous and pretending. Now she is gone. *Good.*’

I want it to be that simple and suspect Rolant is considering the same, turning the idea over in his mind, calculating, thinking of Craddock wielding guns and gas, staring out from the eyes of a mask.

She got what she deserved. *Good.*

Yet as quickly as I decide this, my insides turn as though Toby has kicked them again. It seems too heavy a thing to decide what someone deserves. The word *good* sticks; I find myself resisting its simplicity, its neatness. As though falling into the earth has righted it all, undone anything. Instead I begin to wonder about the rest of Craddock: who were her family? Her friends? And I think only one mask is undone.

‘She liked crossword puzzles,’ I say, ‘I don’t think that was pretend.’

Rolant, bringing the torch to his chest again, seems somehow comforted by this salient fact. He steps back across to join Toby and I on our side of the void.

‘Aren’t we going out that way?’ I say. ‘We should hurry. Faelan has gone to the police. We will have to explain... *the rest,*’ I finish uncomfortably.

I think of poor Rhosyn’s body, strewn in the driveway.

‘Is there time?’ Rolant says suddenly.

‘Time?’

‘Before the cave collapses?’

‘What?’

‘That’s why Craddock was running.’

‘And fell,’ adds Toby. ‘She fell. *I* was tripped.’

‘Why would it collapse?’ I say, looking around the passage for possible signs of weakness, cracks, anything to suggest we are about to be buried alive.

‘The *naked singularity,*’ Rolant recites. ‘*When it dies the fields will...*’

‘Yes?’

‘*Magnetic fields will, will...*’



'I like magnets,' says Toby. 'Are we going home soon?'

'Rolant think!' I insist. 'You've got to remember what Craddock said. I thought you had hipper—*hyper whatever it was!*'

'Hyperthymesia? Is it easy to hear people when they are running? Or very difficult?' Rolant says defiantly.

'But is there anything else you remember? Where was she going? Somewhere safe?'

Rolant closes his eyes for a moment.

'Rolant's tired,' says Toby. 'We should go home now.'

'Quiet!' I say and he looks like I've ripped his raincoat again. 'Let him think.'

Rolant slowly opens his eyes and says: '*There's no radiation in the drift chamber.* What's radiation?'

The word seems to stop my breath. I just stare back at him, waiting for him to claim some mistake.

'Radiation?' I repeat when he just stares too. 'Radiation!'

'What is it?'

'It's bad Rolant, very bad!' I say, hand on my forehead to stop the pounding there. I look along both passages, first in the direction of the one and then down the other and back again. 'We'll just have to try and get out in time.'

'Is that where you think the drift chamber is?'

'No but—'

'Are you good at remembering things you see?' says Rolant. 'Can you remember whole things you look at, like the map, in your head whenever you want to? Do you know about hyperthy—'

'Even if you can remember where the chamber is on the map, that doesn't mean we should go there!'

I feel lightheaded, imagining mushroom shaped clouds of destruction, rays of radiation. Is this *naked singularity* a weapon then? A bomb? I recall Craddock's agitation in the kitchen, talking about ridding the world of people like us. Walter talked like that too. My heart races, trying to decide what or who to trust.

'How far is the chamber?' I say, uncertainly. 'If that's where Craddock was going... it could be safer? I don't know how much time we have! Can we reach it?'

'Are we allowed to run?' says Rolant.

'That's dangerous,' says Toby.

'Radiation and the cave collapsing will be a hundred times *more* dangerous than running in the dark!' I insist.

They exchange a glance.

'Look where you're going,' says Rolant, shining light down the sloping passage, 'we're going to have to run, aren't we?'

\*

Running in semi-darkness, our footfall sounds and echoes with almost deafening volume. We turn several times, knocking and hitting walls, each other, more than once. Toby always seems to fare the worst, Rolant stopping so we can find him when he falls on the floor, where he invariably screams and commands us not to touch him.

Even in the dark, I can tell Rolant is taking us a different way from before. The air is thick and hot in these new passages, the dust pluming so I have to bring my collar up over my mouth so as not to cough wildly like Toby.

Then there is a rumble and I feel the earth beneath me shift. It moves again before I can even slow down, this time throwing me head first into Toby's back. We

both cry out but are soon drowned out by the deafening cracking sounds all around us. From the passage floor, I can see the light spiralling where Rolant has fallen. It takes a moment to reappear in one place, where he materialises against the wall.

I struggle to find some footing in order to move towards him, Toby scrambling along next to me on his hands and feet. My eyes are stinging. I try to wipe the dust from my face but see now, illuminated in the torchlight, there is more falling from above. The light reveals a jagged fracture, running the length of the passage, smaller ones snaking from it as though cracking glass.

‘Go!’ I manage to say, fearing the passage will collapse on us at any moment.

‘That looks dan—’

‘*We know!*’ I say, pushing Toby along.

‘Don’t touch me!’

‘Rolant, the light, come on!’

We begin running again, tremors shaking us like dice against the sides of tunnels. The rock groans and I think there can be no safety, that the very Earth is breaking apart.

‘Stop!’ says Rolant suddenly and I shunt into Toby

‘Don’t touch—’

‘Look, down there!’

Beneath the jagged plateau, the rock slopes down into boulders illumined by a strange glow.

‘Light?’ I say, hardly believing it.

Rolant is already climbing down onto the deeper slope, directing a reluctant Toby. I lower myself warily after them, terrified the earth will shift again at any moment.

‘How can there be light down here?’ I wonder aloud as we approach it.

It appears as though from a different time, a soft haze around a huge brassy structure, something like an old tram carriage strung with cables. There is the intermittent sound of steam escaping, hissing and then silenced by a clanking valve. And something else in its centre—a voice.

Rolant and Toby hear it too and we exchange wide-eyed glances. Who else can be down here now? Rolant turns off the torch and we find our way lit by the gloomy, subterranean light. Above us, the rock continues to groan and I beckon the others to follow me; there can be no turning back now.

Creeping closer, there is a final boulder in the path and from behind it we view the chamber: a great brass construction with colossal gears grinding and reverberating. Its huge steaming pipes clank and disappear into the rock below.

‘Steps,’ I say, pointing to a crooked spiral curving up its side like an old spring. ‘And *look!*’

There, welded into the front of the structure like some garish figurehead on the prow of a ship, is the missing dragon’s head from the carousel. But if it is some kind of ship, where does it go? The dragon grimaces, teeth glinting in the twilight.

‘Who is talking inside?’ says Rolant suddenly. ‘What are they saying?’

And I realise he is right; there are *two* voices coming from inside and, though words are indiscernible, the tone is heated.

The ground quivers suddenly and a large cloud of debris falls. I cover my head but still breath in dust, feel a scattering of pieces, some heavy, striking my back and shoulders.

‘Ow!’

‘Quiet!’ I tell Toby, stifling a cough.

‘A rock fell on my head,’ he says savagely.

‘We can’t stay out here! We have to go in there with...’

‘Miss Craddock?’ Toby says fearfully.

‘Mrs,’ says Rolant.

‘It’s Miss,’ I say. ‘Or *was* Miss; so it can’t be her?’ Though nothing seems certain in this place. ‘Let’s go!’

Staying low, we climb the staircase to the chamber, dust turning in the light’s antique flickering. It shows the dirt on our faces, a gash on Rolant’s cheek, bruises forming on my hands.

The voices grow louder as we approach an embossed chamber mouth and by the time we reach the opening, I already know who lies arguing within.

With a deep breath and a nod to the others, we enter.

‘*Well, well, well...*’ comes the voice, cold and hard as its china host, ‘*just when one thought it safe to watch the world evaporate!*’

Pins flicker in a dozen Roman numeral gauges. Red lines shoot up rusted thermometers around the walls. A hunched figure stands with his back to us, bent over, busily adjusting a series of knobs and dials. His hands move carefully along brass rivets, darting between four large pressure gauges. Next to him a small form sits facing us with legs suspended stiffly in front and a strip of duct tape serving as a head bandage across one eye.

‘*I suppose you thought you’d outfoxed us,*’ says Kizette. ‘*Didn’t you my dears? But you will find...*’

Walter turns, wearing his own duct tape eye patch: ‘That is not so easily done.’

There is a silence as we face each other, Walter’s eye travelling our ranks, pausing momentarily on me. There is no other way out of the chamber. And from the way he leisurely stands, against a large metal stave—not unlike the colour of Ben—his palm slowly coming to rest on it, I sense he is right at home. This is *his* carousel.

Toby stirs at my side, pointing at Walter’s face saying: ‘That tape is only meant for parcels, not for faces. That is—’

‘*Dangerous?*’ Kizette’s voice snarls.

‘Look at where you are Toby!’ says Walter, raising his arms in glorification. ‘You’re in the central drift chamber, about to witness the breaking of the ring singularity! The breaking of everything.’ He lowers his arms, glaring at what can only be a blank reception. ‘But I see you’re only here to make trouble.’

His hand returns to the stave. The earth rumbles ominously.

‘The cave is collapsing,’ I say quickly, ‘what do you plan to do about that?’

‘*Do?*’ Kizette’s sneering voice replies. ‘*We’re not here to do anything, little fool! We’re here to survive; our rite of passage! The destiny of the Aryan to witness a new creation through destruction of the old. So the question becomes: what are you all doing here?*’

I look at Rolant but his eyes remain fixed on Walter, perhaps calculating his next move.

‘There were some bats outside,’ Toby says conversationally yet barely audible over the clanking of the pipes.

‘There’s worse than bats out there! Lots of things waking, before the end,’ says Walter. Then looking at me he suddenly says: ‘But where’s Mother?’ He grits his teeth, ‘where’s Miss Craddock?’

Nobody speaks and, in the telling silence, I notice the tiny red lines in several gauges creep higher. One of the pipes whistles, a hot burst of air shooting from a valve with a resonating sound. And the red finger of its dial travels like the shadow on a sundial, gradually all the way to the opposite side.

Then an explosion like thunder brings several dormant gears and cogs to life. Through the smeared viewing window, clouds of debris start pressing in around us.

'I want to go back now!' shouts Toby.

'You wouldn't like it out there,' Walter says. Leaning back into the copper stave, one deft hand pulling it down. 'There is no *out there*.' And the door drops, fast as a guillotine, the thick metal ringing, heavy bolts shooting across. 'You *will* tell me where she is.'

'Not waiting for her then?' I say, indicating the door, trying to appear confident.

'*Quite the little meddler, aren't you dear?*' simpers Kizette. '*Clearly you've done way with poor old Mother and—*'

'That's not true!' Walter insists.

'*Oh?*' Kizette continues. '*So when we saw her wailing and passing through rocks with the others, that was just part of the plan? Hasn't Mother outdone herself this—*'

'She'll have found another way! She'll be waiting for us somewhere!' Walter shouts, picking her up from the monitor and gripping her by the shoulders. 'She'll make contact when this is over.'

'*Don't be a fool! It's just us now and you know it! You're all alone. Queenie, Queenie, who's got the ball? Always Walter, no one else to play!*'

For a moment his face is livid and he looks as though he means to strike her but the earth shifts and he appears jarred into another thought. The anger fades from his face, shaping it into something else, softer: fear.

'But I'm not alone,' he says, slowly looking to us. 'Yes, we're all sealed in,' he says, placing Kizette down. 'Welcome aboard The Dragon's Teeth, her maiden voyage—her only voyage.' As though dazed by his own words, he turns back to the dials. 'We're committed... *Auf kriegsdauer*.'

'Committed to what?' I say, daring to step closer.

'The end.'

Toby lets out a sob.

I find my hand shooting for the shoulder of Walter's cloth suit and pulling him around. He swings with surprising lightness, like a revolving door, continuing to turn until I catch him and push him back by the jacket.

'No more lantern riddles! The cave is ready to break apart and we're going to be buried down here. Is that what you want? Is that your great plan?'

'We won't be buried,' he says faintly, 'the chamber drops.'

'Drops!' Toby shrieks in horror and grabs Rolant's arm. 'Don't let it drop, don't let it drop, don't let it drop—'

'What do you mean?' I shout over Toby's frenzy.

'We'll ride the magnetic field like a ship on a wave,' says Walter almost romantically, his eyes glazing in some imagined vision, 'it will take us around it.'

Toby stops shrieking and pushes Rolant away, muttering not to touch him. He shuffles up to Walter. 'Where will it take us? Home? Will it take us home?'

'It takes us around... until it evaporates?' says Walter vaguely.

I feel myself let him go, stagger back. *He doesn't know what he's doing*. Did Craddock? Looking frantically around, I find no writing, no instructions anywhere. There is only the sing of metal, the whirr of dials. Does Walter even know how to operate this ship?

Outside the debris is still falling, the tremors doubling below. It is then that I hear the familiar sound, faint but increasing: the white noise from the tunnels. Walter hears it too, his eyes widening.

‘It’s here.’

‘What is it? Where is this thing going to take us?’ I mean to rush at him, shake the answers violently out of his ridiculous mouth but Rolant speaks first.

‘What does it take us around? This?’

Looking over, we find him holding the book—The Dragon and the Sun—open against his chest so the map falls open.

‘The book!’ says Walter, rushing forwards.

Rolant steps back, pointing to the black sun symbol, circular, with its emanating jagged lines, submerged beneath the lowest cavern. Around it are fainter rings, appearing to spin and twist. In the faint lines there is a tiny oval, coming closer I see a mark indicating detail, a window.

‘That’s us!’ I breathe. And looking at where Rolant’s finger is pointing I say, ‘And we’re going around—’

‘The naked singularity,’ says Walter, as though reciting a childhood verse. ‘The point of no dimensions, the Black Sun. A charged rotating disk.’ He stares deeply into the inner symbol. ‘Inside the fields are *infinite*.’

‘Infinite?’ I repeat. ‘So we’ll just go around forever?’

‘I haven’t brought enough milkshake,’ says Toby. ‘We should go home instead.’

‘Too late! The singularity is finally dying,’ says Walter, ‘evaporating like a black hole; its radiation is escaping.’

‘Radiation is bad,’ Toby remembers and points at me, ‘she said it was bad.’

‘Can’t you hear it?’ says Walter, his voice returning. ‘Radiation is creating the radio waves. *Music*. It is how the singularity evaporates, dies. It’s happening, just how Father hoped.’

Walter sighs, running a hand across the beads of sweat forming on his face. The heat is steadily rising, the wall thermometer readings shooting higher and higher, the sound of popping static growing louder.

‘But what happens then?’ I shout. ‘What happens after it evaporates?’

‘It affects Earth’s own magnetic field,’ he says slowly, ‘so once the eclipse is over...’

I look at Rolant and he just blinks back at me.

‘*He means,*’ Kizette’s irate voice explodes through the chamber, ‘*goodbye to the thing protecting Earth from the sun!*’

‘You mean if this thing doesn’t evaporate before the moon stops blocking the sun,’ I think aloud, ‘then...’

‘*All the non-Aryans up there get to fry to a crisp!*’ says Kizette triumphantly.

‘What?’ Toby says in horror. ‘What does that mean?’

‘*Ever seen Mars?*’ says Kizette.

Toby’s mouth hangs slack in horror.

‘That’s not going to happen,’ I say firmly. ‘Is it?’ I turn back to Walter. ‘And what about us? How long do you think we’ll survive in this tin can!’

Around us the white noise is now louder than the rumbling. Walter backs away slowly, appearing to shrink from my question, looking about as though he were in a dream.

‘When they first heard the radio waves,’ he says, ‘they thought the Earth was hollow, they thought they found the answer to the war. They thought they could control the energy, make a weapon.’

‘*Shut up!*’ snaps Kizette.

‘What difference does it make now!’ roars Walter. ‘Mother’s gone! And Father’s friends haven’t come. The death of the Black Sun and none of them came. They’ve all stayed up there. Who are the Aryans now? Where are Father’s people?’

They're all mixed up together, with everyone else!' He shakes his head and turns from Rolant and the outstretched book. He stares out into the crumbling cave. 'Once a place to build. Then just a place to hide. Then a place to hide the spoils. Here again is the place, the time, for war and power. But instead?'

'A place for ghosts?' tries Rolant.

'Ghosts aren't real,' says Toby matter-of-factly.

'They're not ghosts!' Walter says fiercely. 'They're energy caught in the fields, outside of time, tied to the ring singularity. But when it evaporates they'll be set free. *Father* will be set free. And then—'

'Mars?' asks Rolant.

'That's not going to—' I begin but we are suddenly thrown sideways. 'The chamber's moving!'

Walter lunges forwards and grabs the rolling Kizette, strapping her into the braces of his trousers. He then begins wrenching a leather band from a buckle in the wall. We look on as he brings it across his chest, locking it tightly into place.

'What about us?' says Rolant.

'*What about you?*' snaps Kizette, strapped to Walter's chest like a protective amulet.

'No,' says Walter, 'we'll knock like marbles in a tin can.' He jerks his head at the walls. 'Hurry up!'

Rolant and I find one for Toby first and wrestle him in against loud protests. The band comes from the wall with some force, like a car belt, then locks taught.

'It's too tight!' Toby complains as Rolant and I are thrown violently past him.

'Quickly!' I tell Rolant, scrambling to my feet and pulling out another and he secures himself next to Toby, wedging the book deep inside his coat.

On the opposite wall, I find another belt next to Walter. Then, facing the others, we stare at each other, strapped in as if on some strange space mission, the Earth rumbling like a launcher.

Next to me, Walter and Kizette shudder with the rest of the chamber, their matching eye patches vibrating on their faces. I wonder if Craddock can really have been his mother. Feeling my stare, his head turns and his eye meets mine.

'Who are you really?' I say.

'*None of your b—*' starts Kizette.

'We're Germans,' says Walter. 'Like my father and his grandfather—'

'*But not his mother,*' says Kizette sourly, '*not that it matters now with her being another scrap of energy trapped in the field.*'

'Shut up!' says Walter, closing his eye, fists clenched.

'*Well who did we see in the tunnel then? Wandering in the dark. Trapped, trapped, trapped! Just like Father!*' Kizette sings unpleasantly.

'Did he fall down a hole too?' asks Toby.

Walter's eye snaps open and he shakes with rage. 'So it's true? She...'

'Fell down the big hole,' says Toby. 'She was running in the dark, not looking where she was going, and that's dangerous.'

Suddenly the chamber jolts violently and with a deafening crack. My stomach turns as we fall from what feels a great height. Aside from the sound of Toby crying, there is a surge of white noise, blinding flashes. I squint towards the window and see what looks like lightning, twisting in helixes, veins of electricity forking around the chamber.

'What's happening?' I shout.

'Are we going to sail around the big black hole? But definitely not inside it?' Rolant calls across. 'Like in the picture?'

‘Dangerous! Dangerous! Dangerous! Dang—’ Toby is screaming, head twisting in every direction.

‘When we get to a certain radius,’ Walter begins but Kizette’s cruel laugh overtakes it.

*‘We’re going to be spinning like tops!’*

I don’t want to believe her, hearing the cruel laughter fill the chamber, try to shut it all out.

‘How would you know?’ I retort. ‘How would you know anything!’

‘Mother taught us well!’ Walter shouts, beginning to laugh too. *‘Pretend to be like the others, she said, we can use the farm. Fit in. Smuggle supplies. We can finish the work together. Just fit in. And look at me now!’* he shrieks with laughter. ‘Do I fit in at Dyffryn Tŷ now, Mother?’

I stare at the taped doll strapped to him, not sure he had to pretend anything.

He seems to read my expression and his lip curls. ‘You think living with those ingrates was easy?’ he snarls. ‘Better with my toys here, playing alone.’

‘The carousel is yours?’ I say. Perhaps he does know what he is talking about. We truly are going to spin like tops. ‘You really are a part of all this?’

*‘Until father’s old friends wanted to leave us,’* Kizette chimes in.

‘Shutup! Shutup!’

*‘You heard what they said, you heard, you heard, you—’*

‘Why are we going faster?’ Rolant is saying over the rising white noise.

But Walter seems to be trapped circling some memory, Kizette’s voice singing the tune of it like the high haunting voice of a wartime record.

*‘You heard the old men on the radio telling Mother. When she told them to come, they said—’*

‘No!’ Walter pleads, turning his head violently as though trying to break free of the grip of her words.

*‘Invasion not reached England,’* recites Kizette. *‘Abort mission. Repeat: abort. Records to be destroyed. Send map and coordinates for retrieval of the amber panels. Will collect. Retreating to Point 211. Medical council denies you and your son U-boat passage.’*

‘No! Führer wanted us!’

*‘Uh, uh, uhhhhh!’* Kizette laughs. *‘Blue Island racial hygiene will be upheld. We weren’t invited to their party.’*

‘No! N—’

*‘Mother knew best; if she hadn’t given dear old Daddy a gentle death, it would have been ours. Just like you had to give one to darling Dilys!’*

‘I didn’t!’ says Walter, turning to me with his eye wild. ‘I didn’t do that, don’t listen to her!’

‘And Rhosyn?’ I say in disgust. ‘Did she get in your way too?’

*‘Sometimes people just see things they shouldn’t see!’* Kizette croons. *‘What’s a few mercy killings to keep things private around here? And we have, haven’t we? Here we are. Oh, who needs Führer’s silly little Blue Island! It might not even survive the heat that’s coming. No, tomorrow will be our new world—just ours.’*

‘Yes,’ Walter says, ‘yes... we’ll be the only survivors. We’ll start the new race Kizette, clean, the perfect race.’

‘On Mars?’ asks Rolant.

‘We’ll survive?’ I say, squinting into the electricity outside.

*‘We? I don’t see any elite German officials here, do you? Or did you forget your uniforms?’* says Kizette, scathingly. *‘I rather think you’re not supposed to survive. This isn’t meant to be for you!’*

'Is everyone else going to evaporate in the bad radiation because they're not fashionable?' says Rolant. 'Because they have different clothes on?'

'Should we change clothes?' Toby offers. 'Or do we have the right clothes on now? Which clothes mean you stay alive?'

The heat of the wall begins to burn against my shoulders. I feel my hair growing wet against my forehead. 'Walter, you have to stop this!'

'But the war...' Walter says weakly, 'Fatherland.'

'The war is over!' I tell him. 'Look around; there are no sides here!'

And he looks through the rippling heat, the flashes of light, meeting Rolant's tired lidded eyes with their docile, indifferent stare.

'So you think I'm like *him*. After everything, after seeing what my people can build? What we can do!' he says and calls across to Rolant: 'you think I'm like you?'

Rolant gazes back, some calculation turning. He then looks out of the screen, where the currents fork and dance steadily wilder, lighting brighter and exploding like white fireworks.

'Are people made of light like that?' he says, the electricity reflecting in his eyes. 'Am I going to evaporate?'

I feel the heat swelling inside my head. The immense noise continues outside, our speed blurring everything in and out of focus.

'You said they weren't ghosts,' Rolant goes on, 'they're energy? Like that?' His head nods weakly at the window, at the helix of light. 'But which part is Elen? Which part is Mrs Craddock?'

'Which part are the bats?' says Toby fearfully.

Walter grits his teeth, staring into the electricity. 'Fools! It's all the... *the same?*'

The energy bursts around us and the chamber begins to tilt backwards. Toby cries out in surprise as he and Rolant begin to tilt up on their side of the wall.

'Is this the spinning part?' asks Rolant.

'Do something!' I beg Walter, seeing the increasing lightning blur to a wave of searing white. 'It's going to swallow us! Everyone!'

'Swallow,' he echoes at the rippling energy field. '*Drown!*'

He reaches up to his belt and with difficulty manages to release it.

'What are you doing?' I call to him as he crouches low, struggling against the pressure.

He winds the belt around one arm, steadying himself. But then we rotate violently. I hear myself and the others, even Walter, cry out in terror as we all turn sideways.

When I open my eyes, Walter is suspended, dangling down by his arm. He manages to swing across so he is parallel with the dials. I see now that he is trying to reach something, attempting to claw and swing closer to it.

'What are you doing?' I call to him again.

'Drown it,' he cries back, 'must-reduce-the-entropy. It's the only way, only-way-to-shrink-it... escape.'

'Shrink it?' I say uncertainly. 'Shrink the Black Sun?'

'The ice caves below!' he shouts, reaching. 'We can flood the caves above, drown the singularity... stop it, if-I-can-open-the-shaft-reach—'

His hand is reaching for a small lever encased in green glass but it is too far. Suddenly, Kizette comes free, swings down from his braces, hanging by one china hand.

'I can't reach it!' he gasps, straining, 'I can't reach it!'

'Kizette can reach it!' I quickly think aloud. 'Walter, *use Kizette!*'



The chamber shakes with new turbulence as he grips Kizette by the feet and extends her outwards. As he swings forwards, her head strikes the latch casing and it comes open. He swings again and her outstretched china hand almost catches the lever before he swings back.

The chamber begins to groan and tilt backwards once more.

‘Now Walter!’

‘Walter!’ I hear Rolant and Toby shouting too. ‘Get it Walter!’

And he swings forwards again, his body bleary in the heat, appearing to leave a vibrating trail behind. Five Walters, a prism of limbs, are swinging, reaching for the lever, straining. Time seems to drag and shudder. Kizette’s tiny hand reaches out and I hear her voice ringing as it collides with the lever: ‘*God help us all!*’ it shrieks, momentum pulling her and the lever back in a sudden explosion of force.

For a moment, Walter and Kizette shoot towards Rolant and Toby but then they stop. Everything stops in an unnatural silence. Then, just as quickly, Walter and Kizette are volted back towards me, striking the wall hard.

We are then hurtling along at such speed, I can feel the air against my gums. I clamp my eyes shut and feel the chamber turning as we barrel roll backwards.

Then falling, falling.

As it grows brighter, I dare to open my eyes and find a swirling mass at the window, shapes appearing in and disappearing back into the energy. Swarms of electric bats and flashes of fish appear. There are shapes of creatures I don’t recognise, luminous and with protruding eyes and webbed feet, swimming in sparks. They all scatter and dissolve and I can no longer tell if we are turning or whether it is only the mass outside.

And then the shapes of legs, flashes of human hands. A man in a uniform runs past, another in a Dai cap follows, shaking his fist. Blank faces with hollowed eyes form, then reform into different faces, before morphing into colossal sharks and translucent snakes.

Then there is a smaller face, forming close to the screen. It merges with the shapes of writhing ferns, one gleaming frond seems as a hand, touching the world between them and us. There is a girl’s face swimming in and out of focus.

‘Elen? Elen!’ I hear Rolant calling.

It presses itself into the glass and two bright hands materialise there. The fingertips spark against the screen, and a face flickers, forms from a web of electricity. It looks in at us, long hair swirling around the familiar Peter Pan collar. This is the spirit, the one who pointed the way out from the gas; it’s her, *Elen*.

But there is no sign of the gasmask now. Her head moves from side to side, laughing, and someone else is laughing too. And I realise for the first time, I am hearing Rolant laugh. It is a high, light kind of laughter, as if belonging to a boy, a boy he used to be.

Her hands clap together, shooting tiny stars, illuminating the whole chamber with their light. And then one hand raises, hangs there very still. She waves goodbye. A trail of iridescent blue glides and glows as the hand begins to fade. The web of light, connecting her face and hair gradually dissipates, winking out like stars.

‘Elen!’

Her shape twists and fades again into the churning mass, leaving only light. I feel the chamber still falling, drained, as I only dully see the other strange things that form and flash by. And after a time, they all begin to fade, the terrible heat lessening.

As it grows cooler, we seem to slow. I hear a moan and see Walter, his nose bloodied, his arm still wrapped in the belt. He stirs and begins to wrench himself up,

pulling a battered Kizette back behind one of his braces. As he secures himself again to the wall, something else is forming at the window.

‘What’s that?’ I hear Rolant say.

Though all direction has become confused, whatever it is appears above us, and we’re travelling away from it. Together, we stare up through the fading field into a distant but huge sphere, veined with great cracks of obsidian. Within it rotates a colossal flashing disk, appearing thin and dark like the slender iris of a reptilian eye.

‘The naked singularity,’ breathes Walter. ‘The Black Sun.’ He gasps. ‘We... we did it. The water shrunk it without destroying... but, but we *still* travelled around it.’

We watch as it blinks back at us, lidless but flashing glances in each massive rotation.

‘The dragon’s eye,’ I find myself saying.

Walter’s mouth opens, as though to say something but closes again.

As we travel on, I begin to see the bubbles forming at the edges of the screen and wonder faintly if we have really been travelling away from the eye or if Walter really succeeded, and it has simply been shrinking. Jagged shapes begin to obscure it, the eye finally disappearing completely behind a sheet of crystal. With it, the last of the heat ebbs away, an uncomfortable pressure building in my chest and ears. And I come to realise we are looking into a sheet of ice. I tear my eyes from it to look at the others, finding a groggy-looking Rolant and a dazed Toby, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

‘Where are we?’ I struggle.

‘Nothing was destroyed but time moved. *We are forwards,*’ I hear Walter mutter. ‘We did it. We’re here... alive in the tomorrow.’

I grow increasingly heavy and tired. I try to call to Rolant and Toby but neither answer, or they do, and I can no longer hear because of the pressure in my ears.

Thoughts slow.

I feel a lightness inside, think I see some flicker of light, one of the dials on the wall?

It is so quiet.

And then I imagine lanterns on a river, four lanterns taken by the current, but to where I cannot see.

\*

The magpies do not stir as the man approaches the door and he wonders what could have encouraged such pests to sit, bold as brass like that, on the roof of Llwynypia.

‘Bird feeders,’ he finally concludes as he raps self-importantly on the cottage door, ‘that’s what it is.’

A girl like Miao wouldn’t know that leaving food in the garden attracts vermin. Some control is needed when encouraging things around one’s home. He makes a note to tell her this.

Continuing to wait, he casts a glance around for the feeders, perhaps even a bird table, yet finds only weeds lining the vacant driveway. Something yellow is fluttering against the base of a nearby tree.

‘Litter? Uncovered bins,’ he mutters, ‘of course.’ And he rocks on the balls of his feet as he waits to be let in.

He left three telephone messages to make sure she didn’t forget he was coming, for the plants, on the way back from his holiday. No, there could be no mistaking the day.

He waits for some time before looking through the window. It is not a thing he would normally do, after all it is hardly polite, and he doesn’t want to be accused of

peeping. But something about the silence and those ugly birds on the roof makes him do it anyway.

Spying the large mound of unopened post, his tomato plants withered dry upon the sill, a strange feeling comes over him.

He paces around the cottage. Miao should have told him if she were planning her own trip away. Rhosyn alone really could not be trusted to remember his plants. But his cousin, Addfwyn, will no doubt have left a long, rambling explanation on the answer machine for when he drives the rest of the way home to England.

Here was a thing he didn't miss about living in Welsh villages: once you were out of the community, no one remembered to tell you a thing. After all, what other explanation could there be? The last time he spoke to Miao, she...

And with a hollow feeling he realises how long it has really been. Leaving a message wasn't quite the same as hearing someone's voice, knowing they were there. She may not have received any of his messages. There was no knowing who actually took his plants inside; he just left them on the step.

He tries to shake this nonsense from his head, striding away down the drive. Addfwyn's pub now seems the best place to get immediate answers. But as he goes, a sudden breeze frees the piece of yellow plastic from the tree nearby and it blows across, cartwheeling and clinging to the side of his shoe. Snatching it up and examining the fluorescent strip, he recognises the ominous black lettering of police tape, and the honourable teacher swallows hard.

'Bore da!' a voice calls from the road.

He looks up to find a little white-haired woman, her jumper laced with stray feathers, a large Alsatian panting at her feet.

'Good morning,' he replies, marking her irritation at his English.

'Won't get no answer there,' she says, gesturing at the cottage. 'You must not be from round 'ere to not be knowing that.'

'Why?' he says hastily. 'What's happened?'

She looks down at the old rope in her hands, loosening it a little so the dog is able to reach a part of the pavement he has become interested in sniffing. 'Well who's asking? We've all had a bellyful of talking about the thing now.'

'I've come to see the girl,' he clears his throat, '*the woman* who lives here.'

'Then I'm very sorry to you, bach.'

'And why is that?'

The woman shuffles a little closer and lowers her voice. 'She has sadly passed on.'

'Passed on? You mean... How?'

'I am afraid she,' and the woman lowers her voice again so that it is no more than a whisper: '*took her own life, she did.*'

'Dear God!' he cries, looking back at the cottage. 'No, there were two, *two* women living there.'

'Oh, well if you're meaning that little one from away?'

He breathes a heavy sigh, then nodding agitatedly, persists. 'Yes, what of that woman? Where is she?'

'Gone.'

'Gone? Gone where?'

'Just gone,' the woman shrugs, 'that's all I know. Not seen her since, well, what happened.' She gives him a consoling pat on the arm and says: 'Good luck to you now. Hwyl fawr.'

He watches her shuffle away, his mouth slightly open. Listens to the click, click, click of the old dog's nails along the path. He watches until they gradually disappear from view, sound fading.

Where could Miao be? With her mother, or brother, in China? There is a sinking emptiness as he realises, in wonder, that he doesn't possess a forwarding address for either. It seemed not so long ago his voice need only to call out to another room in their shared house. Now they were somewhere in China's billion, there again as strangers, as when they first met. There again, as if they never met at all.

His gaze slowly returns to his hands because there is a strange sort of lightness in them now, as though they can no longer hold onto anything.

The tape flutters free in the breeze, spiralling away without a sound.

\*

*'I am a little collier and gweithio underground,'* a deep voice is singing across the fields.

A fat pheasant is startled from the bracken and hurries away into the hedge.

*'The raff will never torri,'* the singer pauses to watch the bird and then continues: *'when I go up and down.'*

Gethin shakes his head wearily. Every time something stirs, he supposes it a sign of them. Or else Addfwyn; should he even think to rest for a spell, have a little sit down on a stile, she is sure to appear looking daggers.

But this would be the fourth day on the trot they were out helping comb the land. The policewoman was right when she said they knew it best. Yet for all their knowing, countless generations working and walking this land, could they find a thing? There was neither sight nor sound of them and he was sinking for a cup of tea. There was no peace to be had since that odd girl, very same one he'd found hiding in his barn the once, came running into the pub talking trouble.

But for shame on him to complain! Suppose it were the lad who helped him in the haying season? There he was, gone? Aye, if one of the young balers were in a fix, wouldn't he expect the village to be looking hard? And quickly he becomes sorry in his heart for thinking too much for himself and not enough for the poor Chinese girl. Not to mention the two from Dyffryn Tŷ; what hope did fellers like that have out in the countryside after dark? And that Rolant, the one with all the daft questions, they said that mad scretch Craddock took him at gunpoint.

'Poor dab,' he mutters aloud, 'is there's any 'ope for 'im now?'

He soon feels his heart is so heavy it is like a stone. To think what the police found when they went through Craddock's things, not just the Nazi mess, but letters from her man, the escaped Jerry prisoner from Pencraig! Aye, it dragged up the past something nasty. Finding they'd used the good nature of those at Dyffryn Tŷ, peaceful sorts, as their cover. Germany and the war were not so far back people of the village didn't still feel the sting!

Even as he thinks this, his roaming eye catches movement, a flash of something between the gaps of hedgerow, passing along the opposite lane. His heart leaps.

But for all that, when the shape reaches the break, the rusted gate, it's only a lad from Pencraig Farm, stick in one hand and rope in the other. He is leading down the bull as told, pausing for the old brute to rub his great quivering shoulder on the gatepost. Gethin watches as the lad tugs on the rope, the silver ring through the beast's nose catching the sunshine, glinting. Agitated, the bull bellows, his voice echoing across the fields. The great piebald head swings, the stumps of his horns lowering, regarding the lad. Gethin hesitates, thinks to start over. But the bull merely

flashes the yellow labels in his ears, as if recalling his horns are all but gone, and raises his head once more. The shuddering bulk presses on, pendulous undercarriage swinging.

Unnoticed, he watches the lad disappear from view, the top of his young head bobbing along the hedgerow. Ordinarily he would have called out to him: *ho, you watch yourself lad*. But he stopped himself.

Gethin sighs again. Then, shielding his eyes from the sun, he looks across the land, the green fields like scales running the sides of the dragon hills. Not so long after Pencraig reported their Jerry escaped, his own father went out, a shotgun no doubt in the crook of his arm, walking the fields as countless generations of their farm had done, just as Gethin walked now. Only to disappear into a sinkhole. Dragged out at dawn, too late.

‘Aye, this earth’ll swallow us all up in the end...’

Though his warnings to mind out for sinkholes didn’t seem to deter the news folk currently hovering around Dyffryn Tŷ. Like crows around a crippled sheep they were, circling that poor farm. Keeping on at locals and printing nothing but guesses where the bodies were! It threw up something his father was known to say, turning from all the nastiness in the newspaper: *‘Times I could cry when I stop to think about it all.’* But he was a Welshman which meant he always sang instead.

Gethin sighs and strikes out with the walking stick, a good piece of wood he found yesterday, while searching Crythor Forest.

*‘It’s bara when I’m hungry,’* he begins singing again, *‘and cwrw when I’m dry. It’s gwely when I’m tired...’*

Soon another rusted gate comes into view and Addfwyn and Owen’s voices can be heard talking in the place they agreed to meet for news.

*‘And nefoedd when I die,’* Gethin murmurs the last of the song.

‘Look out, here comes old serchus now!’ Addfwyn crows as he approaches.

‘Thought we were going to have to send out another search party for you and all!’

‘Any luck?’ says Owen, his dog panting at his feet.

‘I can’t think where they can be,’ Gethin replies as he presses through the gate, ‘I’ve ‘unted ‘igh and low.’

‘Well,’ Addfwyn says briskly ‘still early days yet. They are sure to turn up.’

‘Goodness knows where!’ says Gethin but, seeing Addfwyn’s face, he adds: ‘a sorry thing it is.’

‘And not the first,’ nods Owen.

‘Oh don’t you be bringing all that up now,’ says Addfwyn.

The three make their way into the lane, the dog following at their heels.

‘Well, weren’t we all had by that Walter?’ Owen insists. ‘I knew ‘e was never right, tried to warn you but—’

‘Oh, don’t say stories! You knew no better than us what that one was up to.’

‘Now Addfwyn, how many times did I say—’

‘You felt it in your bones?’ says Addfwyn. ‘We’re all filled up on that talk already! Fancy carrying on to that policewoman about poor old Dilys back when we were young.’

‘Was my business to! Have you know Dilys was a second cousin o’ mine.’

‘Oh, give it a rest our Owen!’ sighs Addfwyn. ‘In Wales, we’re *all* second cousins if you look hard enough.’

‘I tell you, I always thought ‘e had a hand in what happened to her! Whoever heard of Walter playing ball with the others, friendly like? I never drank up that story, not the day he told it, and never against today. Been nothing but bad since he came to the village. Why, he likely gave Rhosyn the smack that did her in too!’

‘Owen! You take that back! Rhosyn did that to herself!’ Addfwyn insists, her cheeks suddenly flushed. ‘You know I won’t pass no remarks but she was like Dilys’ father the drinker; her own worst enemy! And not one of us can say we didn’t see it.’

‘Not *always*,’ says Owen. ‘She only went funny after the thing w’ Dilys. I tell you Walter, not Dilys’ father, knew more than what he let on! Here we are looking for missing people again and look how ‘e is in it up to the eyes! All this proves the thing.’

‘And leaves us miserable as sin!’ Addfwyn says throwing up her hands. ‘Now can you stop aggravating it all?’

Owen shrugs the shoulders of his puffer jacket. ‘Fine. I said my piece to the police.’ His dark eyes look out over the land. ‘Their business what comes of it now.’

‘Yes, and they can keep it,’ Addfwyn says. ‘A nasty business it is too.’ She sighs as they reach the top of the lane, gazing across the patchwork of fields leading into the forest. ‘Our piece is to look after what’s ours.’

‘Aye,’ Gethin chips in, ‘and we will.’

‘Taking our tea at Dyffryn Tŷ again?’ says Owen.

‘Yes,’ says Addfwyn. ‘Remind me to pick up another spoon.’

And the three of them could be seen on many an afternoon, walking the fields and forest, an eye to the hedgerows or to the ground. Long after the dogs were called off, along with the news people, and the police with sticks to bat through the bracken, those three could be seen out searching.

Perhaps that was why, over a decade later, when old Gethin found the huge metal object in the river with a banging coming from within, he thought to open it. Inside, he glimpsed four careworn persons through the smoke and wreckage. Stepping back onto the bank, he faced the grimacing figurehead, the dragon’s teeth glinting in the sunlight, read the words etched beneath: *Blut und Boden*. Then the face of Walter emerged, startled but unchanged by the years.

And the old man had the presence of mind to knock him out with his stick.



China, 2012: Year of the Dragon

Ri has been sitting beneath the pagoda for some time, leaning to count carp. His thoughts hover like the dragonflies, just above the water of a memory. In it two children, a twin brother and sister, were watching fish in a pool much like this one. What did sister say when that fish came floating? *Wake it up.*

He smiles.

Zengrui's bicycle rings out through the tranquil gardens and he stops to slowly dismount near the step. His greying hair no longer shining like ink, he leans his bicycle next to Ri's and steps into the shade of the pagoda. He is holding a letter, the official seal glistening.

Ri opens it with one graceful movement, the kind inherited from his father. As he leans into the words, Zengrui slyly positions himself so as to read at his shoulder. Ri's eyes have already travelled midway down.

*—next of kin making you privy to the information regarding two deceased and unrecovered World War II spies. Their son, Walter Craddock, has been found participant in the murders of: Dilys Blevins; the remaining witness, Rhosyn Prichard; and abducting your relative, Miao Tian. In a case where the evidence required military enforced censorship, I Justice L. Pugh have been authorised to write to you personally and in the assurance of avoiding international misunderstanding. Let it also be known to you that this private court has concluded Walter Craddock (in conjunction with psychiatric record submitted on his behalf via military-assigned legal representatives) should be removed to an isolated—*

The ink pools slightly, as though the writer paused here for some time, before crossing out the former in order to write:

***more isolated** facility to receive appropriate treatment. The other victims have been returned to their original environment of supported living and, in the interest of peace, contracts of silence (enforceable if necessary) secured. As to the other abnormalities of this case, I am not at liberty to discuss or disclose anything more to you at this ti—*

Ri folds the letter and slowly brings it to rest in his lap. At the edge of the pagoda, sparrows hop and scratch the earth. He counts how many times one takes flight from the others, only to return again, twittering.

'My father loved to watch sparrows,' he says. 'He knew how to look so closely in the moment, he could later ink every detail from memory.' He slowly stands to face Zengrui. 'Now I am the father watching sparrows. What happened?'

'Time,' says Zengrui. 'And too many troubles.'

'I am back exactly where they all began,' says Ri, half smiling. 'Here we are again: mother and sister and brother all together in China again.'

He looks across the gardens to the incense sticks, burning beneath the plum tree, where his mother's portrait and inscription lies.

'You spend years looking for your missing sister,' Zengrui says, raising an eyebrow, 'then she returns, unharmed, and still you are not happy?'

'*She has not aged,*' Ri mutters. 'Our parents are with our ancestors. I have children of my own. Yet Miao looks as young as the day I first left England. Time has scattered my family forever.'

The months since Miao returned to China unfolded steadily, marked by several strange postcards from Wales. Ri's daughter found the first one, a picture of daffodils inscribed:

*Are there trains in China? What kinds? Because Mr. 7AM says there are no stops there. Not even emergency ones. What about telephones?*

—R.

Miao mostly sat in her new room, overlooking the busy streets of Tianjin, very quiet. Her words appeared to become sealed into postcards, Ri glancing at them, taking in the glimpses of her inner thoughts, before reluctantly posting them abroad.

*You would like it here Rolant. There are no cows. But there are fireworks. Say hello to Kizette.*

*Your friend, M.*

Whenever he reminded Miao that she should not be making contact, she only shrugged: 'They are words; it's not the same.'

Zengrui now puts his hand to his eyes, shields them from the sun, as he watches a strange wind blow the blossom from the trees. 'Time separates yet continues many things,' Zengrui mutters, 'I don't pretend to know why.'

Ri's gaze remains on the ancestral tablet beneath the plum tree, the last of its incense rising. 'Perhaps it is not for us to know.'

'It is not good for the mind to be too curious,' agrees Zengrui. 'You will become like that man's postcards: filled with nothing but questions.'

Laughing, Ri pats his friend's shoulder and begins to walk from the pagoda. 'You think I should stop them? I am advisor in my house, not emperor.'

'This is true,' Zengrui sighs. 'But his questions are so foolish. What was it last time? *Will the clay empress and emperor be together again?* I would write back to tell him it was not important to know this and goodbye.'

'A wise answer,' Ri nods, amused, and then raises the official letter to the sun, holding it there for a moment to consider the words faintly showing through.

Then with an elegant flick of his wrist, he folds the paper over and around until a new shape forms.

'Very clever,' says Zengrui, admiring it.

But to his surprise and disappointment, Ri flicks his wrist again and the tiny origami glides down into the pool.

'We need that!' Zengrui says, stepping quickly to claim it back.

'No,' says Ri, 'we don't.'

'But Ri, that's official!'

'The past is all ink and paper,' he says, beckoning Zengrui to follow. 'If we need it, I will pick up a pen and glance behind.' Then pulling his bicycle to him he adds: 'Just not for too long.'

'All this thinking will wither us into old men!' Zengrui shakes his head and mounts his seat. 'Whatever happened to our youthful fire for adventure?'

'Better an old man heading home I think,' says Ri, nodding at the origami dragon shrinking into the pool, 'today.'

And Ri rides his bicycle, ringing the bell, so that he might pass easily through the chaos of many different people, and return to his family.



In a quiet, unhurried house a young man sits in afternoon sunshine. There is the smell of lunch and laundry and pine needles from a jam jar on the sill. A breeze is blowing and catching the watercolour paintings from the shelf. From the bed, the man watches them drift to the floor, a clay figure in his hands.

A voice calls up to say lunch is ready. Feet rumble towards the stairs.

The clay empress is carefully placed on the shelf, next to a little wooden emperor. One by one, the fallen watercolours are picked up and arranged next to it. The sunlight illuminates swirling shapes, people and animals, great moons with black discs at their centres, perfectly protracted in pencil. In one corner, the slightly singed doll watches, her single eye glittering in the midday sun.

'This service,' someone says from the doorway, 'has a complimentary lunch trolley.' Mr. 7AM shuffles into the bedroom, his cane probing the floor. 'And wheelchair access.'

'Are you missing lunch?' Rolant replies. 'Or going down alone?'

Mr. 7AM frowns. He then turns in the direction of the shelf, gazing at the doll there.

'A carriage to yourself is it, little girl? Where's that chaperone of yours got to? Dear me, now whatever happened to *him*... Hm? Oh, you'll have to speak up! Can't hear a thing over the engine. What's that now? Mind your manners, that's no way to speak to a conductor!'

Rolant has returned to stand by the bedside table where a new telephone holds pride of place.

'Are Chinese calls very expensive?' he says, eyes on the receiver.

'Please excuse me Miss, there's a gentleman waiting.' He turns to Rolant saying: 'Sir, a single ticket is...' but his old eyes just blink several times. 'A single is... *hm*.' He raps his cane on the carpet and sighs. 'Wait by the counter boy and I'll ask a supervisor.'

He hobbles to the door, where he stops to catch his breath.

Rolant continues to stare at the phone, his eyes tracing a familiar number sequence. 'Is it very far to China?'

'Have you checked the schedule?' Mr. 7AM says, waving a hand irritably at the watercolours. 'Now do hurry up and choose your seat.'

'But is she staying forever? With her family in China?'

Mr. 7AM readjusts himself against the door frame. 'The fare is cheaper with a family ticket,' he states. 'But you'll get there by half past one either way, unless you have a railcard? Do you travel these lines very often young man?'

Rolant goes over to the watercolours, considering their spheres and pencilled angles, infinite angles, taking the lines forwards in a linear prism. He could measure similar angles, lines like these, aging everyone's faces, greying their hair. But when he turns to the sunny window pane, his own lineless reflection is there staring back at him, unchanged.

And this is the reason *they* said he should not see her again. They did something very serious. A thing no one did before. Something they weren't supposed to talk about again—ever again. But that seemed a very long time not to talk about something, not to see someone.

'Well do you or not? I've got passengers waiting.'

'Travel?' says Rolant slowly. 'Does... time travel count? Even if you can't go backwards? Back to Miao, back to Elen?'

'*Back?*' Mr. 7AM says, shaking his head. 'You want to go back? What nonsense! We haven't even left!' he insists.

Someone downstairs is calling their names.

‘Hear that?’ says Mr. 7AM. ‘Aaaaaall aboard!’ And beckoning with his hand, marches from the room like a much younger man.

The bedroom seems to shrink a little.

Outside, Rolant finds the sun moves across a cloudless sky. The wind stirs the treetops.

Voices begin to travel up from the garden below. Someone asks who they are waiting for now. Someone is asking about a picnic blanket. Someone is shouting about sponge cake. Someone has already spilt the blackberry cordial. Those voices are all intertwined, down there, beyond the glass.

The stair lift begins to squeak faintly down the bannister, Mr. 7AM’s voice descending with it: ‘Look out! Here comes the lunch trolley...’

Then there is a silence, a pause, as though a voice is missing.

‘Will there be jam sandwiches?’ Rolant finds himself suddenly calling out. ‘Hamilton’s jam?’

He listens, hard, hearing the dull creak of the house, the clatter of someone dropping knives and forks, a familiar laughter.

‘Look no further,’ the old man suddenly bellows from halfway down the stair, ‘it’s all here my lad!’

‘With mustard?’

‘That’s the ticket. Full steam ahead!’

And taking Kizette from the shelf—something rattling inside her like a voice—he resolves to have his sandwiches outside in the sunshine, where the rhythm of another day sounds beneath the pines.